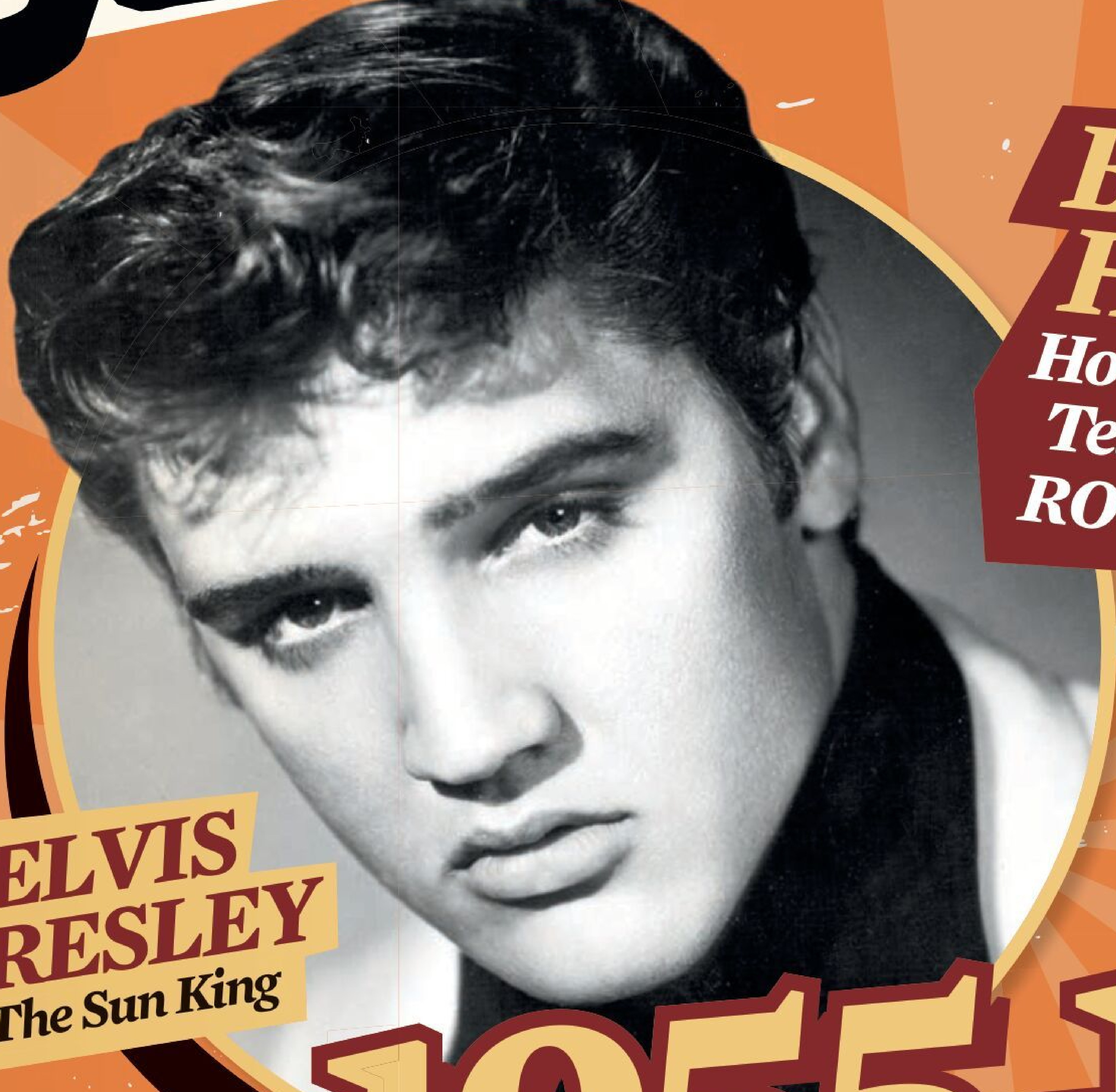
VINTAGE★ROCK PRESENTS

THE Rock 'n' Roll YEARS

VOLUME TWO

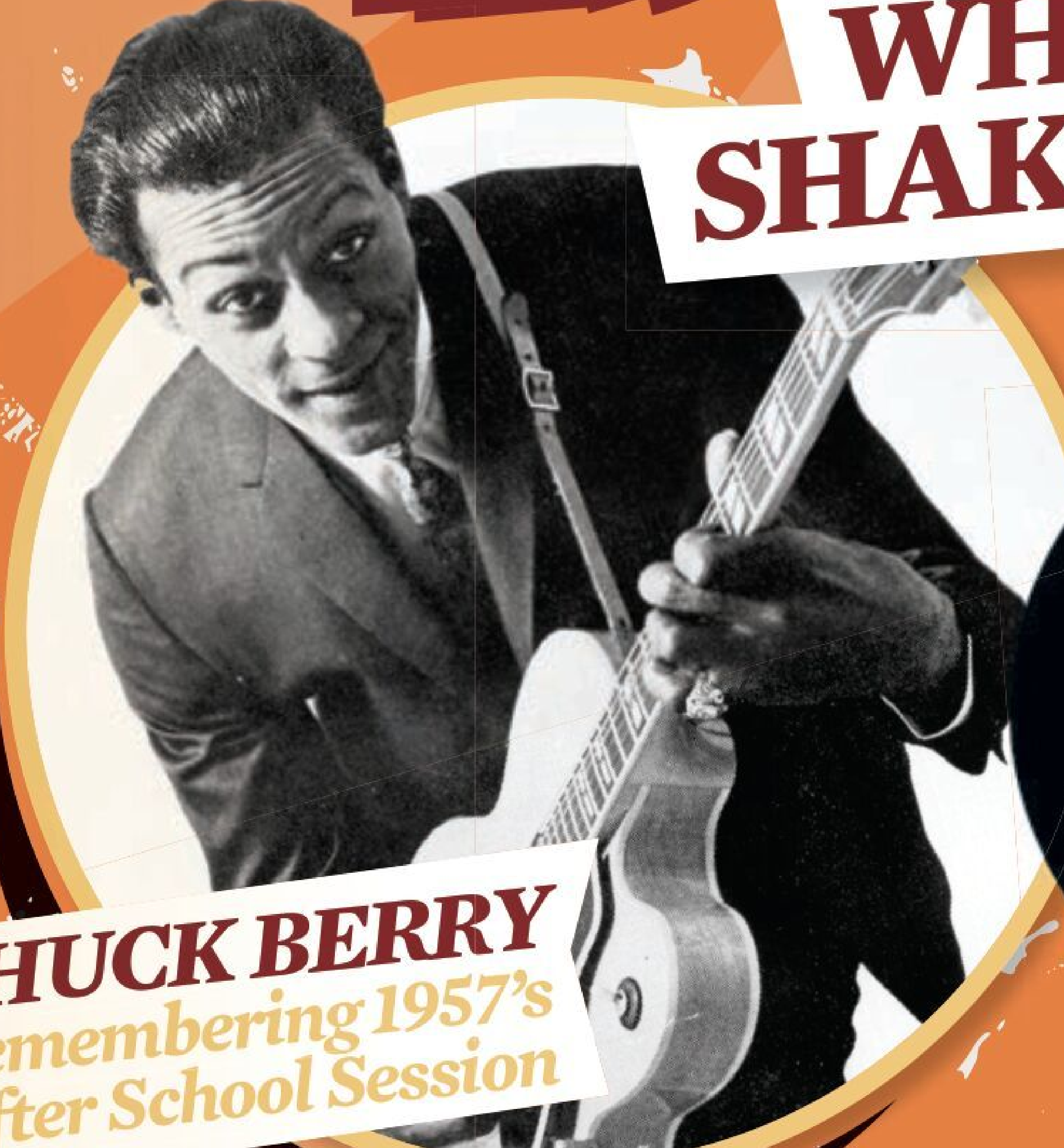


ELVIS PRESLEY
The Sun King

BUDDY HOLLY
How a kid from Texas rewrote ROCK'N'ROLL

1955-1959

WHOLE LOTTA SHAKIN' GOING ON!



CHUCK BERRY
Remembering 1957's After School Session

PAYOLA 1959
The scandal that rocked the music world

HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD
Behind the scenes of a rock'n'roll classic

PLUS Carl Perkins ★ The Rock 'n Roll Trio ★ Billy Lee Riley ★ Cliff Richard ★ And more!

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.com

★★★★ TOM INGRAM PRESENTS ★★★★

VIVA LAS VEGAS

ROCKABILLY WEEKEND

25
25th ROCKIN SILVER YEAR
© Vince Ray

APRIL 14-17
2022

www.vivalasvegas.net

VINTAGE★ROCK

Anthem Publishing
Piccadilly House,
London Road, Bath, BA1 6PL
+44 (0)1225 489984

vintagerock@anthem-publishing.com
www.vintagerockmag.com
www.facebook.com/vintagerockmag

EDITOR Steve O'Brien

ART EDITOR David Graham

PRODUCTION EDITOR Rik Flynn

ADVERTISING
ADVERTISING MANAGER Leah Fitz-Henry
+44 (0) 7789 763610

ANTHEM PUBLISHING
CHIEF EXECUTIVE Jon Bickley
jon.bickley@anthem.co.uk

MANAGING DIRECTOR Simon Lewis
simon.lewis@anthem.co.uk

CREATIVE DIRECTOR Jenny Cook
jenny.cook@anthem.co.uk

MARKETING EXECUTIVE Mike Langroudi
michael.langroudi@anthem.co.uk

CONTRIBUTORS
Johnny Sharp, David Burke, Julie Burns, Bill Dahl,
Rik Flynn, Randy Fox, Michael Heatley, John Howard,
Rocko Jerome, Douglas McPherson,
Michael Stephens, Jack Watkins

PRINTED BY
William Gibbons & Sons Ltd
+44 (0) 1902 730 011

DISTRIBUTED BY
Marketforce (UK) Ltd,
5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London,
E14 5HU +44 (0) 20 378 79001

LICENSING
Regina Erak
+44 (0) 7753 811 622
regina.erak@gmail.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS & BACK ISSUES
PLEASE CONTACT:
0844 856 0642* (UK)
+44 (0)1371 853 609 (US)
email: shop@anthem.co.uk
web: anthem-publishing.com/vintage

ANTHEM | PUBLISHING PPA

All content copyright Anthem Publishing Ltd 2021, all rights reserved. While we make every effort to ensure the factual content of *Vintage Rock* magazine is correct, we cannot take any responsibility nor be held accountable for any factual errors printed. Please make every effort to check quoted prices and product specifications with manufacturers prior to purchase. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or resold without prior consent of Anthem Publishing Ltd. *Vintage Rock* magazine recognises all copyrights contained within the issue. Where possible, we acknowledge the copyright holder. All paper used in this publication comes from responsibly managed forests.

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C013669

Welcome...

If the first half of the 1950s saw blues, country, doo-wop and R&B coalesce into the sound of rock'n'roll, the years 1955 to 1959 would see this new genre of music truly take hold. Rock'n'roll would, by the latter half of the decade, no longer be just one of a myriad of musical genres on offer to young people, but be *the* dominant sound of its time.

In our last issue we looked at some of those artists and tracks that helped create the phenomenon that Alan Freed would eventually christen 'rock'n'roll', from LaVern Baker to Hank Williams to Ike Turner's revolutionary *Rocket "88"* single. In this second part we look at the era when rock'n'roll truly flowered, a time when Elvis Presley became the biggest musical star in the world and when Buddy Holly shone so briefly and brightly. We remember some of the groundbreaking albums of the era, including Chuck Berry's *After School Session* and 1957's *Here's Little Richard*, and examine two of the era's finest rock'n'roll flicks – 1956's *The Girl Can't Help It* and 1959 Brit classic *Expresso Bongo*.

Elsewhere, we have features on The Quarrymen (who of course would evolve into The Beatles), rock'n'roll's greatest nearly-man Billy Lee Riley, country and western maverick Johnny Cash and, of course, the great Eddie Cochran. We also list the 20 essential singles from the latter half of the 50s and talk to the surviving family of rock'n'roll's most famous siblings, Johnny and Dorsey Burnette.

All that's on top of features on the 1959 payola scandal, the women of rock'n'roll, Jerry Lee Lewis and The Day The Music Died, that tragic date in February 1959 when we lost Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper.

Look out for our third and final volume of *The Rock'n'Roll Years* in a few months' time.

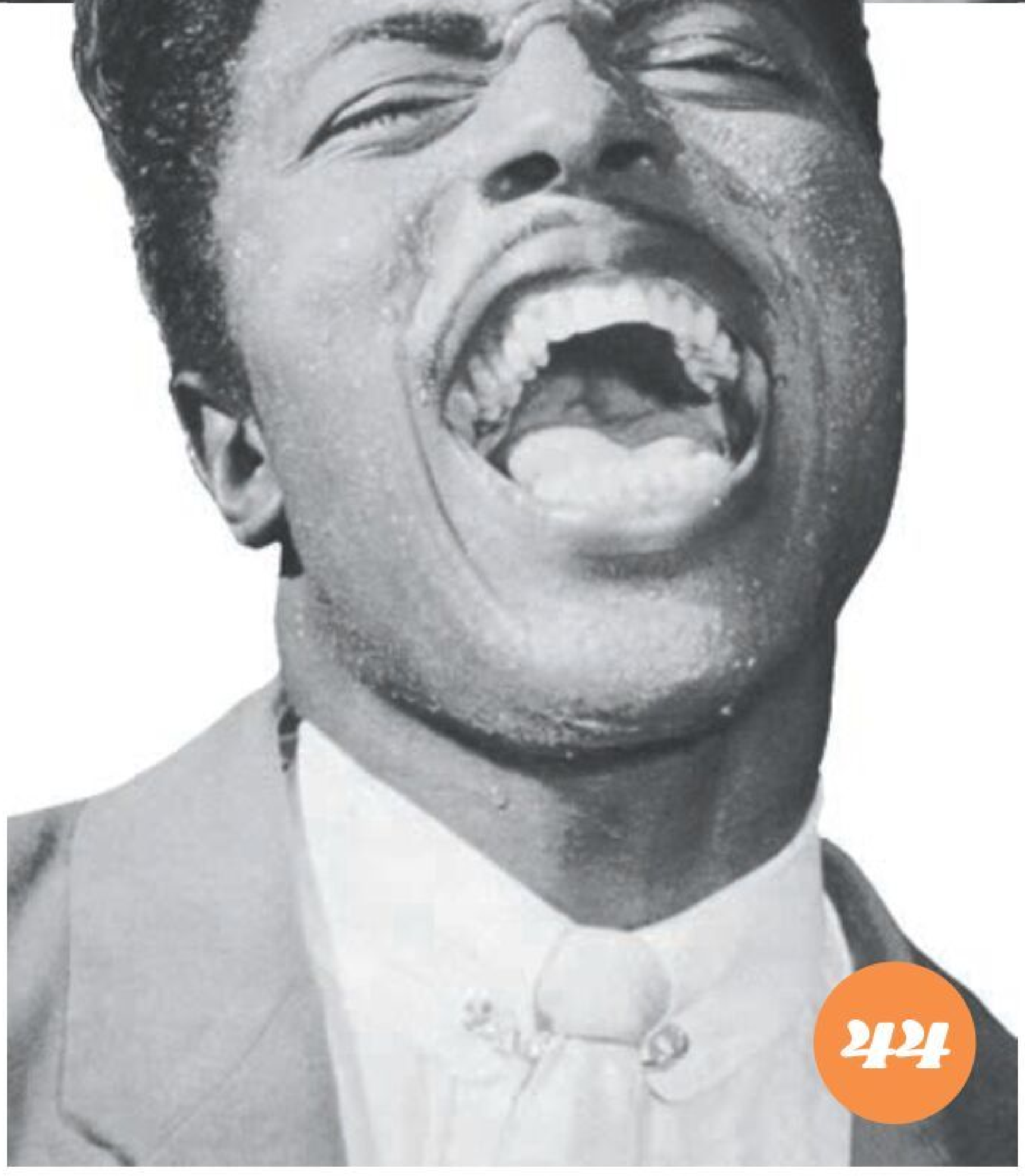
Enjoy!

Steve

Steve O'Brien
Editor

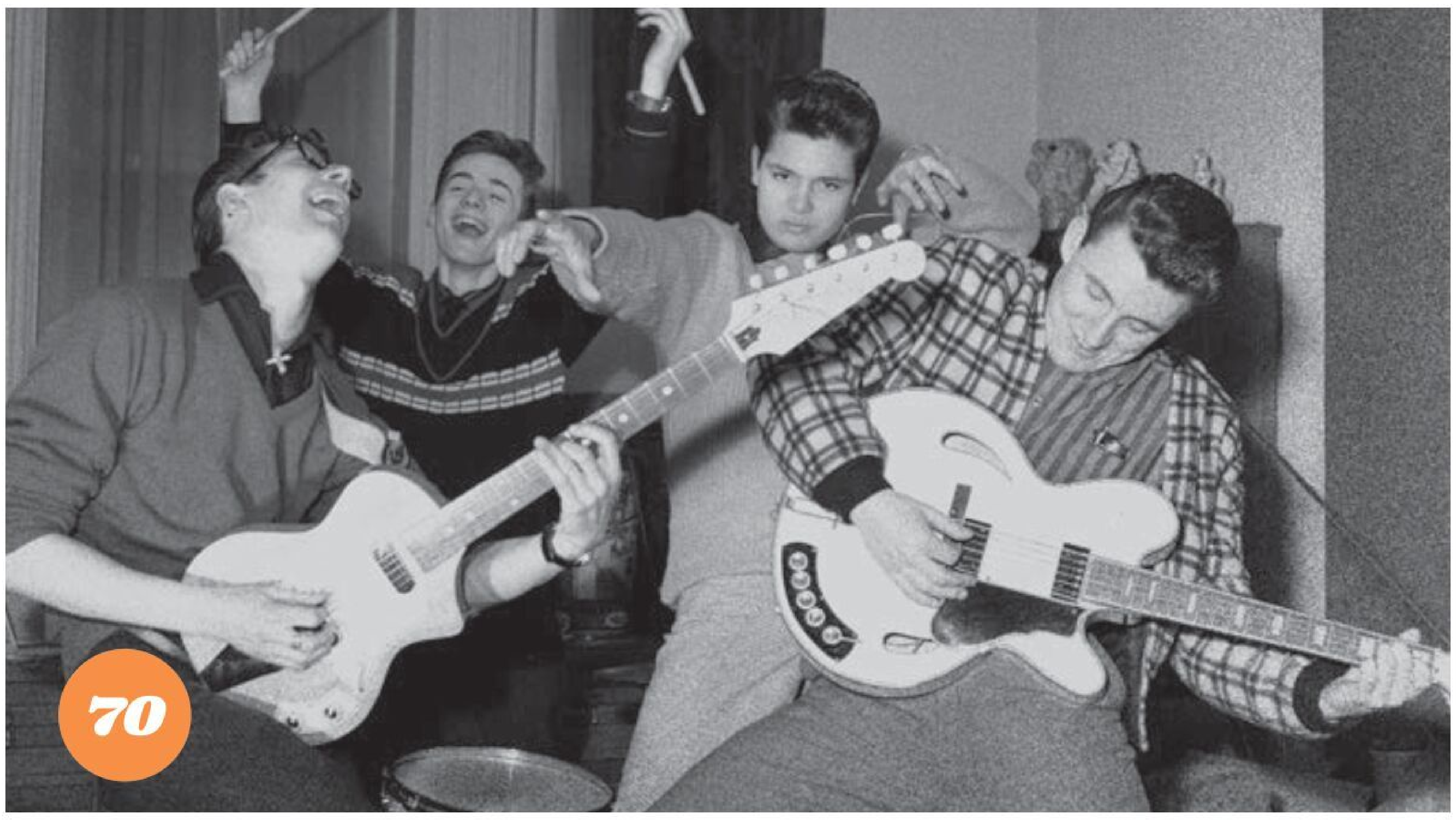
6

28



44

76



70

© Getty

Contents

ELVIS PRESLEY **6**
Brought to life via the sights and sounds of the vibrant Memphis streets that surrounded him, Elvis Presley met Sun's visionary boss Sam Phillips and the stars aligned. We revisit the story of how an impoverished young kid from Tupelo rose to become the ultimate rock'n'roll icon

THE QUARRYMEN **16**
When John Lennon found himself caught up in the skiffle mania that swept across the UK in 1956, the young Liverpudlian could never have known that his humble outfit would go on to become the biggest band in the world

JOHNNY & DORSEY BURNETTE **22**
In this archive interview, *Vintage Rock* sat down with Burnette family members Jimmy, Chanti and Diane to discuss the incendiary legacy left behind by cult rockabilly heroes, the Rock 'n Roll Trio

THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT **28**
Sixty-five years on from its cinema release, we toast the big-screen rock'n'roll flick that brought the riotous sounds of Little Richard, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent and more to life in full glorious technicolour

JOHNNY CASH **34**
Another to arrive at Sun Studio's door with high hopes of stardom, Johnny Cash found a unique sweetspot between country and rockabilly all his own – and the enigmatic Man In Black was born

HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD **44**
One of the wildest and finest long-players cut during rock'n'roll's imperial phase, Little Richard's debut album harboured a freight train set that's still guaranteed to raise the roof over six decades later

CARL PERKINS **50**
The man behind big beat colossus *Blue Suede Shoes* was the real deal, and were it not for injuries sustained in a car crash, Carl Perkins would have been the first rockabilly on American TV and – perhaps – a challenger to Elvis' throne

BILLY LEE RILEY **54**
He's considered a master of the art by the rockabilly faithful these days, but back in the day Billy Lee Riley had his wings clipped at Sun, leaving behind a cruel tale of bitterness, anger and ultimate frustration

BUDDY HOLLY **60**
Lubbock's famous bespectacled son Buddy Holly remains one of the most iconic figures of rock's golden era and even though his stay on this Earth was short, he left behind a timeless catalogue

BRITS ON THE BEAT **70**
It took rare 45s brought over here from the States to fire up the British rock'n'roll revolution, but when it happened, it spawned a breed of Brit rockers hungry to deliver the new sounds on their home turf

JERRY LEE LEWIS **76**
With Elvis playing with the big boys over at RCA, Sun boss Sam Phillips' latest piano-pounding acquisition more than made up for the gap left by the King

TOP 20 .... **86**
From close-harmony magic and rhythm and blues classics through to rockabilly marvels and Chicano rock – we curate our essential playlist presenting the best the second half of the decade had to offer

EDDIE COCHRAN: SINGIN' TO MY BABY **92**
Eddie Cochran is remembered by the world at large for the rockin' classics – the likes of *Summertime Blues*, *C'Mon Everybody* and *Twenty Flight Rock* – but on the only album released during his lifetime, he revealed there was far more to him than just the hits

CHUCK BERRY: AFTER SCHOOL SESSION **98**
An in-depth look at Chuck Berry's many-flavoured debut album, a pioneering record that housed everything from pumping rock'n'roll and country ballad to Caribbean patois

RED HOT MAMAS **104**
The musical landscape back in the 50s allowed little room for women to make their mark, but the likes of Ruth Brown, Wanda Jackson, LaVern Baker and Janis Martin were never going to be held back

THE PAYOLA SCANDAL **108**
Whether accepting dollars for airplay, wangling erroneous writing credits, or securing fee-free live performances, many of the DJs of the era made sure their nests were feathered. We investigate the landmark case that brought their house of cards crashing down...

EXPRESSO BONGO **114**
Cliff Richard and his band had secured chart success with an original track, *Move It!*, but when they appeared on the cinema screen in Val Guest's music biz satire *Expresso Bongo*, their careers took off big time

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED **118**
It's a tragedy still felt deeply today. When Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, The Big Bopper and their pilot, Roger Peterson, plunged to their deaths on a snowy night in February 1959, the world recoiled in shock. We pay tribute to those who lost their lives on the most tragic day in the history of rock'n'roll

SUBSCRIPTIONS **128**
Subscribe to *Vintage Rock* and save 35%. Plus! Join *Vintage Rock Plus* this Christmas and get two free rock'n'roll CD compilations!

CODA **130**
Alan Freed's notorious big beat flick *Go, Johnny Go!* premieres in cinemas bringing together a cast that included Jackie Wilson, Chuck Berry, Eddie Cochran and Ritchie Valens on the silver screen

98

22

60

Catching The Sun

According to family and friends, the young Elvis Presley did not look to be a confident star in the making. Michael Stephens charts the extraordinary transformation of a singer who would, by the late 1950s, be the biggest rock'n'roll artist in the world...

Elvis Presley was more than a singer. He was – and still is – an icon of popular culture, the first larger-than-life superstar, a folk hero and legend, yet also something of a myth.

In today's musical landscape – post *X-Factor* – stardom is transient: no-one can seriously believe this year's sensation will be anything but a footnote in pop history in 20 years time. Yet decades after Elvis Presley's death, his allure remains astonishing. Type 'Elvis' into Google and you get over 300 million returns. By contrast, the UK's biggest pop icon, 'Lennon', gets around a third of that number. Google is certainly not the arbiter of all, of course, but the search results send a message: Elvis is still all around.

It's partly the myth that still fascinates, as the basics of Elvis Presley's life read like a fable – his rags-to-riches life story featured family tragedy, a meteoric rise to fame, unrivalled adulation, an opulent lifestyle, excessive habits, and a tragic (and, some would argue, rather pathetic) demise.

But what a rise it was. And Elvis Aaron Presley's influence on world pop culture began when he was just 10 years old.

THE PRESLEYS LIVED in Tupelo, Mississippi, and it was here that Elvis made his first public performance. Even at this tender age, Elvis would spend many Saturday afternoons at the Tupelo Courthouse from where the radio station WELO broadcast its Saturday Jamboree programme. The Presley family were not musical, but young Elvis was entranced by song. He sang *Old Shep,* a song about a 19-year-old German Shepherd dog, for WELO a few times.

Elvis had no formal training in music. In a 1965 interview he remembered: "I sang some with my folks in the Assembly Of God church choir [but] it was a small church, so you couldn't sing too loud."

But when, at the beginning of his school term in 1945, pupils were asked if they would like to read or sing a song at assembly, 10-year-old Elvis obliged. He sang *Old Shep* again. His teacher Oleta Grimes remembered, "He sang it so sweetly". The school principal was similarly impressed and they decided Elvis should be entered into a singing competition in the upcoming 1945 Mississippi-Alabama Fair And Dairy Show, held in Tupelo.

Legend has it that young Elvis, wearing glasses, had to stand on a chair to reach the microphone in front of several hundred people watching him perform at the fair (other attractions at the event included such items as mule-pulling contests). Elvis sang alone, and he didn't win: some early records say he was second (myth again). As Presley himself later said "I think I was fifth". But he did win free passes for all of the rides at the fair, plus $5. Plus, he also got to be broadcast on his beloved WELO Saturday Jamboree radio programme.

Five bucks was a lot of money to young Elvis. The Presley family were poor and constantly fretting about money. Meagre meals of cornbread and water were not uncommon – a sad situation which, some might suggest, shaped Elvis's later addiction to lavish meals. But parents Gladys and Vernon Presley doted on Elvis as best they could, even if he wasn't immune to a whipping for bad behaviour. However, their ultimate love was understandable: Elvis was the twin of a boy who was stillborn.

His parents saved enough money to offer him a choice of present for his 11th birthday on 8 January 1946 – a bicycle or a guitar. Elvis wanted the bicycle, but mother Gladys was fearful he would get run over. She cajoled him: "Son, wouldn't you rather have the guitar? It would help you with your singing, and everyone does enjoy hearing you sing."

If ever a simple gift born of a mother's worry has shaped pop culture, it was surely this: Elvis Presley was given a guitar. And ➡

Elvis with his parents Vernon and Gladys in 1937 in Tupelo, Mississippi

soon after that, everything surrounding him changed, too – for when Elvis reached 13 years of age, the Presley family relocated from Tupelo to Memphis.

MEMPHIS WOULD HAVE been a musical Mecca for the young Elvis. Home city to numerous blues pioneers, the scene revolved around the legendary Beale Street, though Elvis, still young, had to mainly settle for the seductive sounds of Memphis radio. But the city was alive with culture, and Elvis and his new pals would occasionally venture to Beale and Main Streets to watch the street performers, or just hang out at the vibrant local markets where there was always music playing.

Memphis radio was aural nectar, and by 1950 Elvis could have been listening to southern blues hits by Muddy Waters, Lowell Fulson, Elmore James and many more. Elvis was still taking his guitar to his new Humes School, but he remained a reluctant performer. His father Vernon later remembered, "He got shy. He was afraid the kids would laugh at him."

Once again, it's a myth that Elvis Presley the schoolboy was practically useless at anything but music studies. His school grades were decent, if hardly spectacular. He got an A for Language and some Bs and Cs yet regular 'Excellent' ratings for application, if not for aptitude. Ironically, one of his C grades was for music.

That grading stung Elvis. In perhaps a pivotal moment, he overcame his shyness and asked to play in front of class to prove wrong his music teacher Miss Marmann, who had said he "couldn't sing". According to his schoolmate Katie Mae Shook, Miss Marmann capitulated with a back-handed compliment: "She agreed that Elvis was right and she didn't appreciate his kind of singing." Nevertheless, Presley had made his point to appreciative classmates. He eventually left high school with a diploma, of which he was immensely proud all his life.

As he matured around the time of his 17th birthday, Elvis began to set himself apart. ➨

Elvis wanted a bicycle, but mother Gladys was fearful he would get run over. She cajoled him: "Son, wouldn't you rather have the guitar?"

A young Elvis in the early 1940s

Elvis posing with 'Texas Bill' Strength around 1955

Despite – or perhaps because of – his poor upbringing, he decided to dress differently. He wore 'dress pants' (suit trousers) while his classmates wore denim. He draped cheap yet extravagant scarves around his neck. He grew his sideburns like the cross country truck drivers he admired so much. He put Vaseline in his hair to keep his proto-quiff in check. Elvis volunteered to play football, but was allegedly kicked off the team by other players when he refused to cut his hair. The teenage Elvis was blossoming into an early archetype of the rock'n'roll outsider.

Elvis didn't now care about the occasional snide remarks of his schoolmates as music was now his best friend, albeit mostly in the gospel churches and concerts that he and his family regularly attended.

In April 1953, aged 18, and a couple of months before he graduated from high school, Elvis performed in Humes' School annual Minstrel Show. He was 16th on a 22-act bill and listed in the programme as 'Elvis Prestly', but he wowed classmates, parents, and teachers alike with his performance of Teresa Brewer's early 1952 hit *Till I Waltz Again With You*.

Elvis later noted: "It was amazing how popular I became after that." The once-shy boy had managed to suddenly set aside his inner insecurities in favour of being an animated performer. This 'odd-looking shy boy', Elvis Presley the 'mama's boy', suddenly found himself on the lips of all who knew him.

IN MEMPHIS, THE influence of local Sun Records was inescapable, and the label's output was regularly played on the radio stations that Elvis devoured. It was perhaps no surprise when, in August 1953, he walked into the offices of Sun.

Elvis aimed to pay for a few minutes of studio time to record a two-sided acetate disc: *My Happiness* and *That's When Your Heartaches Begin*. Elvis later claimed he wanted the record as a gift for his mother, or was merely interested in what he 'sounded like' on record. But there was a much cheaper, amateur record-making service available at a nearby general store. So perhaps that's another self-deprecating myth? Elvis biographer Peter Guralnick believes that Elvis was simply being canny: he knew all about Sam Phillips and Memphis music from nights with his ear pressed close to the radio speaker. Elvis went to Sun in the hope of releasing a record. Here, the Elvis legend truly begins.

A teenage Elvis was allegedly kicked off the football team by other players when he refused to cut his hair. He was blossoming into a rock'n'roll outsider

Sun Studio receptionist Marion Keisker was told by Elvis, "I sing all kinds", but when she pressed him on whom he really sounded like, he repeatedly answered, "I don't sound like nobody". Elvis charmed Keisker to the point where she later remembered: "He was so ingenious, there was no way he could go wrong."

Sam Phillips himself was initially unconvinced, but after another two exploratory singing sessions he asked Elvis back to meet two local musicians he knew: guitarist Winfield 'Scotty' Moore and upright bass player Bill Black. Phillips wanted 19-year-old Elvis Presley to try a 'proper' recording session.

Elvis' first official session of 5 July 1954 was nothing special until, late at night, Presley took his guitar and launched into a 1949 blues number, Arthur Crudup's *That's All Right*. Scotty Moore recalled, "All of a sudden, Elvis just started singing this song, jumping around and acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting the fool, too, and I started playing with them.

"Sam [Phillips], I think, had the door to the control booth open... he stuck his head out and said, 'What are you doing?' And we said, 'We don't know...' 'Well, back up,' Sam said, 'try to find a place to start, and do it again!'"

Phillips quickly began taping. If nothing else, the studio owner was amazed this 19-year-old white boy knew an Arthur Crudup song. Just three days later, popular Memphis DJ Dewey Phillips played the raw acetate of *That's All Right* on his Red, Hot And Blue radio show. Phonecalls flooded in: who was this singer? Interviewing a nervous Presley live-on-air later, Dewey Phillips clarified Elvis' colour by asking him to state the school that he had attended (schools in the South were still segregated at this point) for the benefit of listeners who might assume the singer was a black American.

Sam Phillips, says Marion Keisker, had a regular mantra at the time: "If I could find a white man who had the negro sound and the negro feel, I could make a billion dollars."

SUN
RECORDS
SUN
Wabash Music Co. BMI
Vocal U-128
"THAT'S ALL RIGHT"
(Arthur Crudup)
ELVIS PRESLEY
with
SCOTTY and BILL
209

Elvis' first single, *That's All Right*, in the distinctive Sun Records sleeve

Myth? Legend? It was a bit of both. But Phillips had now found a young white man who could pay that billion dollar cheque... even if Elvis Presley, in his more mundane life, was recently a truck driver for the Crown Electric Company earning just $1 an hour.

THAT'S ALL RIGHT was no immediate smash hit. It eventually sold a respectable 20,000 copies and made it to No 4 on the local Memphis charts. Nationally, it didn't originally have much commercial impact at all. Part of the problem was that radio stations were reluctant to even play it – most stations, in fact, chose to play the B-side, *Blue Moon Of Kentucky*, instead. But for those music fans looking out for something brand new, *That's All Right* was like a lightning bolt.

As Elvis' close friend George Klein remembered "It was so different – a white guy singing a rhythm and blues song. It was the beginning. A lot of [DJ] guys were apprehensive to play it."

> **"It was so different – a white guy singing a rhythm and blues song. A lot of guys were apprehensive to play it"**

Musicologists and writers have debated for decades what the first rock'n'roll record really was. It's a futile pursuit, of course, as music always evolves gradually and there are no flags in the sand that define a 'big bang' of something 100 per cent new. The Sex Pistols weren't the first 'punks', Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets were 'rapping' before hip-hop became a named genre, Black Sabbath didn't 'invent' so-called heavy metal, and so on.

Presley himself once remarked: "A lot of people seem to think I started this business,

Elvis with Sam Phillips, Leo Soroka and Robert Johnson at Sun Studios in 1956

Elvis on Sun

Elvis recorded at least 24 songs at Sun Studio between 1953 and 1955. The recordings reflect the wide variety of music that could be heard in Memphis at the time. The recordings are of such historical significance in the foundation of rock and roll music, they were inducted into the U.S. Congress' National Recording Registry in 2002.

Of the 24 known taped songs (see below), 22 survive. Ten were released by Sun as Elvis' first five singles between 1954 and 1955. With the exception of the first four songs, which were demos recorded at Presley's expense, all of the songs were produced by Sam Phillips (naturally).

My Happiness
That's When Your Heartaches Begin
I'll Never Stand in Your Way
It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You
I Love You Because
That's All Right
Harbor Lights
Blue Moon of Kentucky
Blue Moon
Tomorrow Night
I'll Never Let You Go (Little Darlin')
Satisfied
I Don't Care If the Sun Don't Shine
Just Because
Good Rockin' Tonight
Milkcow Blues Boogie
You're a Heartbreaker
Baby Let's Play House
I Got a Woman
Tryin' to Get to You
I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone
I Forgot to Remember to Forget
Mystery Train
When It Rains, It Really Pours

but rock'n'roll was here a long time before I came along."

But Elvis certainly started something. While most scholars (or music nerds) claim Jackie Brenston And His Delta Cats' *Rocket "88"* (recorded in 1951 by Ike Turner and his band at Sam Phillips' Sun studios but credited solely to Brenston, the singer on the session) has the best claim to be the first true rock'n'roll single, Elvis' *That's All Right* blew down the walls. In 1954, America was still highly segregated. Few ordinary white people paid attention to 'negro' singers. But white boy Elvis, who many first assumed was black, opened the door to a whole new world of music.

Press reviewers didn't even know how to describe Elvis. Early reviews of *That's All Right* and Presley variously describe him as a "hillbilly singer", "a young rural rhythm talent", a "white man singing negro rhythms with a rural flavour", and "a young man with a boppish approach to hillbilly music". All just words, ultimately. But it was the music and Elvis' image, not the words of the critics, that really resonated.

As John Lennon, a young Liverpudlian boy who only first heard Elvis on 1956's *Heartbreak Hotel,* said: 'Before Elvis, there was nothing.' As soon as Lennon heard Elvis playing on the radio, he asked his family to buy him a guitar.

AFTER THE RELEASE of *That's All Right*, Elvis was increasingly in demand as a live singer. An appearance in September 1954 at Memphis's Katz drugstore – a showcase, in today's terminology – drew a crowd of teenagers. The late country legend Johnny Cash was a witness to the event.

"The first time I saw Elvis, singing from a flatbed truck at a Katz drugstore opening on Lamar Avenue, two or three hundred people, mostly teenage girls, had come out to see him," Cash remembered. "He sang those two songs [*That's All Right* and *Blue Moon Of Kentucky*] over and over... plus some blues songs and a few numbers like *Long Tall Sally,* and he didn't say much." ➡

Elvis didn't need to say much; his leg gyrations did it for him. In a recently-recovered interview from 1956, Presley recalled: "I guess people want to know why I can't sit still when I'm singing. Some people tap their feet, some people snap their fingers, and some people sway back and forth. I just sort of do them all together, I guess. I watch the audience and we are getting something out of our system and no-one knows what it is." The adage of 'all the girls want him, and all the boys want to be him' had begun.

By the time of his second single, *Good Rockin' Tonight* backed with *I Don't Care if The Sun Don't Shine*, Phillips had managed to secure Elvis an appearance at the Grand Ole Opry (October 1954). This was a breakthrough, as the Opry, a strictly-organised showcase of wholesome, family-friendly country entertainment, had never booked a singer so early in his career. Elvis' performance of *Blue Moon Of Kentucky* received a "polite, but somewhat tepid, reception" said one press report, and the Opry's manager later told Phillips that Presley "just did not fit the Opry mould".

Elvis was crestfallen, but remained determined. In the first fortnight of October 1954, he played seven shows. He managed to impress the *Louisiana Hayride* – a live Saturday night country music radio show, carried by 190 stations in 13 states. They offered him a regular slot, and Elvis quit his truck-driving job.

Elvis had suddenly become a professional singer. More than that, his local shows were attracting so much attention, he soon found it hard to commit to the Hayride. Memphis: we have lift-off.

ELVIS' METEORIC RISE remains a true pop phenomenon. The Beatles toiled at home and abroad for quite a few years before breaking through; in more recent times, Oasis got very big very quickly, but of course their trajectory was aided by a highly-evolved modern music media offering endless press promotion, video and outlets for songs. In the context of mid-50s America, Elvis Presley's ascendancy remains perhaps the most remarkable of any pop star.

On 5 January 1955, 'Alvis Presley' (as he was billed) topped the bill at Texas' San Angelo City Auditorium. It seated 1,855, and hundreds of teenage girls rushed the stage for Elvis' autograph. Three days later, he managed to sing for the Hayride again: Elvis was introduced as the 'Memphis Flash' and was described to the radio audience as wearing 'crocodile-skin shoes with pink socks.' Back then, he must have sounded like some alien dandy superhero. Before long, he was even wearing pink trousers and a charcoal tuxedo. Madness, you might think, but no-one thought Elvis was 'weird' anymore: the girls and boys understood – this man had the style, sex and rebellion that has since defined pop music.

Elvis soon had a new manager on board, the notorious 'Colonel' Tom Parker, who put Elvis on a support slot with singer Hank Snow. A cheque was made out to Elvis for $425 (which equates to $3,000-plus in today's money) – and that was just a 50 per cent advance on what he could expect to earn over a period of just five days.

At the end of a Jacksonville performance in May 1955, Elvis announced to the audience of 14,000: "Girls, I'll see you backstage". A full-scale riot then ensued, with fans chasing Elvis into his dressing room and tearing off his clothes and shoes. This was fully-fledged pop mania on a level that overshadowed even Frank Sinatra's troupe of famously overzealous 'bobby soxer' fans. Tom Parker's eyeballs must have been rotating with dollar signs.

Yet for a 21-year-old with the world soon to be at his feet, Presley was still full of the doubts and outsider mentality of his formative years. In 1956, he candidly admitted: "Maybe someday I'm going to have a home and a family of my own, and I'm not going to budge from it. I was an only child, but maybe my kids won't be. Am I in love? No. I thought I've been in love, but I guess I wasn't. It just passed over. I guess I haven't met the girl yet, but I will and I hope it won't be too long because I get lonesome sometimes.

"I get lonesome right in the middle of a crowd, and I get the feeling that with her, whomever she may be, I won't be lonesome, no matter where I'll be."

And Elvis, like many artists, remained a mass of contradictions. Even at 21, he was adored yet felt "lonely". Scotty Moore remembered him as a "typical coddled son... he was more comfortable just sitting there with a guitar than trying to talk to you... there was nothing phony about it, he truly loved his mother." Give him a stage, however, and Elvis was transformed.

It was 1956 before Presley released his debut album and appeared on TV, but by the end of 1955 he was already a star. The world just didn't know it.

Elvis Presley, the performer, was like no other of his time. He not only had the voice and the songs, he also had the moves. He could sex-up a crowd of girls (and boys), he dressed with a confident panache, and he had a winning smile. The once-shy boy, at 21, had become King. ✶

Guitar Showman

Elvis never became a virtuoso guitar player. His local pastor, the 21-year-old Frank Smith, helped the boy out. "He bought a book that showed how to place your fingers... I would show him some runs and chords from what he was learning out of his book. Not that I taught him how to play, but I helped him."

Elvis probably never even wanted to be a 'guitar player' as such. Watch the earliest footage of him as a fully-fledged star in 1956 and he uses his guitar like a prop, even a barrier; a guitar was maybe just something to hold onto while he worked on his stage moves. But Elvis always wanted to be a singer. "He was crazy about music," recalled school friend James Ausborn, "That's all he talked about." Elvis was soon taking his guitar to school every day. After classes, he'd take it from his locker and sing and play the best he could. Not every fellow pupil liked him, though: one day, some other boys cut his guitar strings in half.

"I get lonesome right in the middle of a crowd, and I get the feeling that with her, whomever she may be, I won't be lonesome, no matter where I'll be"

Elvis poses in his dressing room backstage on *The Milton Berle* Show in 1956

BEFORE THE BEATLES

In 1956, a teenager named John Lennon formed a group that would develop into the biggest band of all time. *Vintage Rock* remembers The Quarrymen, the skiffle outfit that, within a few years, would evolve into The Beatles...

WORDS BY **DAVID BURKE**

"Everybody was in a skiffle group," said George Harrison of the hip new craze that swept through Great Britain in 1956. "All you needed was a guitar, a washboard with thimbles for percussion, and a tea chest – the ones they used to ship in from India. You put a broom handle on it and a bit of string, and you had a bass. You only needed two chords."

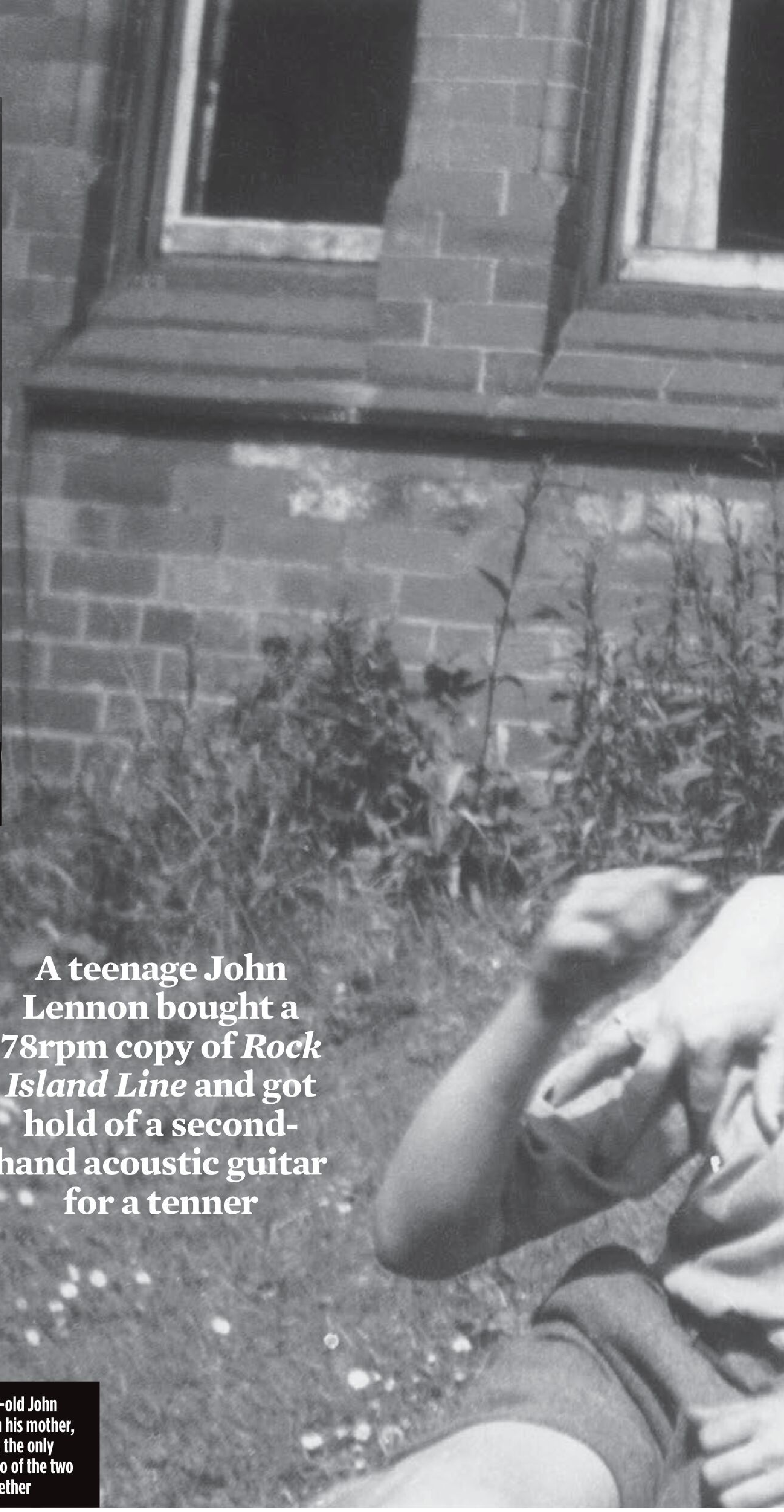
Skiffle, essentially a hotchpotch of jazz, folk, blues and other roots forms using homemade or improvised instruments, actually originated in America during the 1920s. It gained popularity in Britain some three decades later, principally through Ken Colyer and Lonnie Donegan (who had a Top 10 hit on both sides of the Atlantic with *Rock Island Line*), inspiring legions of aspiring young musicians to form groups. The likes of Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey, The Bee Gees, Van Morrison and, most significantly, The Beatles – known then as The Quarrymen – cut their musical teeth in a movement that, at its height, featured tens of thousands of players and sparked a phenomenal increase in the sales of guitars. Church halls and cafés were appropriated as venues, along with the 2i's and the Cat's Whisker coffee bars in London's Soho, as well as nightspots such as the Coconut Grove, Churchill's, and, in Liverpool, the Cavern Club.

According to Iain Chambers in his book, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music And Popular Culture*, skiffle "offered a major democratisation of music-making. With little money and limited musical skill, it became possible to be directly involved in popular music."

➡

While his little guitar gently weeped: An 11-year-old George Harrison in 1954

John Lennon, circa 1948, when he lived in Woolton, Liverpool, with his Aunt Mimi and her husband George



A nine-year-old John Lennon with his mother, Julia. This is the only known photo of the two of them together

A teenage John Lennon bought a 78rpm copy of *Rock Island Line* and got hold of a second-hand acoustic guitar for a tenner

Rod Davis, who became part of The Quarrymen, was in his dad's car on Merseyside when "the sound of Donegan doing *Rock Island Line* came wafting out of this record shop and changed my life forever, basically. The same thing happened to thousands of youngsters. What he did was, he got people playing instruments, so when rock'n'roll did come along, there were all these people who could play three chords on guitar. So without Donegan's early import and the popularisation of skiffle, what happened would've been very different."

A teenage John Lennon bought a 78rpm copy of *Rock Island Line* and got hold of a second-hand acoustic guitar for a tenner, courtesy of his estranged mother, Julia, who had long since relinquished his care to her sister, Mimi. He had a couple of lessons before giving up, bored by too much theory and not enough practise. Though perhaps Mimi had an unwitting influence, as she'd often tell him: "The guitar's alright, John. But you'll never make a living with it."

Instead, Julia taught him some chords on the banjolele, a hybrid of a banjo head and bridge with a small-scale ukulele neck (they removed two strings and tuned the remaining four to a uke configuration – a very skiffle thing to do!). One of the first tunes Lennon mastered was *That'll Be The Day*.

Like many of his peers up and down the country, Lennon was soon getting his own band together.

Not unusually in Beatles folklore, accounts of his genesis as a performer vary. Some say he formed a duo with Pete Shotton, a friend at Quarry Bank primary school, and that they called themselves The Blackjacks. But most suggest The Blackjacks were Lennon and Shotton, together with another pair of school friends, Eric Griffiths and Bill Smith. Griffiths, who died in 2005, said he, Lennon and Shotton became close "mainly through our common interest in music and rock'n'roll from the USA. Interests in school activities waned in favour of girls, smoking and the music. When skiffle came along it presented the opportunity to channel our interests."

The Blackjacks morphed into The Quarrymen: Lennon or Shotton coining the moniker from a line in their school song, *Quarry Men, Strong Before Our Birth*. Smith left and was replaced by Nigel Walley, Ivan Vaughan and Len Garry, drummer Colin Hanton and Rod Davis on banjo.

Davis explains: "I had an uncle who had been playing in a dance band in North Wales. He played the saw and the fiddle. He said his brother-in-law, from the same band, played banjo and guitar and was selling both of his instruments. By the time we got onto it, the guitar had been sold. I just wish I'd had the

guitar instead – who knows, I might have been a Beatle instead!"

The Quarrymen wore Teddy Boy threads and had their hair piled high and slicked back like Elvis. Rehearsals took place at Shotton's house on Vale Road (before his mother exiled them to the corrugated air-raid shelter in the back garden because of the racket), at Hanton's and Griffiths' homes, and Julia's on Bloomfield Road. But for all their youthful brio, initially, The Quarrymen adventure was "all very half-hearted and irregular", Hunter Davies notes in *The Beatles: The Authorised Biography*, with people "always coming and going, depending on who turned up at the party, or who wanted to have a go". Lennon's erratic character was already beginning to manifest itself even then, and there were frequent bust-ups that led to several departures from the group.

"I used to row with people because I wanted them out. Once you had a fight, that was the end and you had to leave the group," Lennon explained.

Recorded by P. F. PHILLIPS
KENSINGTON
IN SPITE OF ALL THE DANGER
Play with a light-weight pick-up
(McCartney, Harrison)
Recorded by P. F. PHILLIPS
KENSINGTON
THAT'LL BE THE DAY
Play with a light-weight pick-up
(Holly, Petty)

THE DEBUT RECORDING

The sole recording by The Quarrymen – a version of Buddy Holly's *That'll Be The Day* paired with the original *In Spite Of All The Danger* – stayed with pianist John 'Duff' Lowe for 23 years. When the 1958 session at Phillips' Sound Recording Service in Liverpool was finished, the band agreed each member would hold on to the disc for a week. After having it valued by Sotheby's in 1981, he was contacted by McCartney. "I was living in Worcester at the time and he sent his solicitor and his business manager up. I deposited the disc in a small briefcase at the local Barclays bank, and we met up in a small room. The deal was done, I handed the record over and we all went home." The amount McCartney paid was never disclosed, although apparently, Lowe rejected an offer of £5,000.

Little Maccas – Paul McCartney with younger brother Mike (later of comedy music combo The Scaffold)

The Quarrymen managed to work up a setlist largely predicated on the American roots material popularised by Donegan and his ilk – *Rock Island Line*, *John Henry*, *Worried Man Blues*, *Wabash Cannonball*, *Cumberland Gap*, *Daddy-O*, *Railroad Bill*, *Freight Train*, *Last Train To San Fernando*, *Maggie Mae* and *Puttin' On The Style*. As Lennon increasingly gravitated towards rock'n'roll, Elvis' *Let's Have A Party* became his big number, while *Baby Let's Play House*, *All Shook Up*, *Johnny B. Goode*, *Peggy Sue* and *Bye Bye Love* were also added to their canon.

Meanwhile, in another part of Liverpool, Allerton, at the end of 1956, a teenage Paul McCartney traded the trumpet his dad had given him for a guitar. He applied himself diligently to his new instrument, quickly picking up songs by Elvis and Little Richard, alongside Eddie Cochran's *Twenty Flight Rock* and Gene Vincent's *Be-Bop-A-Lula*. McCartney was mates with Ivan Vaughan, then a member of The Quarrymen, who suggested he come along to St Peter's Parish Church fête in Woolton to hear his group. That Red Letter Day in the annals of rock'n'roll – the moment Lennon and McCartney were introduced to each other, the day, in the words of Lennon himself, "it started moving" – was 6 July 1957.

McCartney, though, was somewhat underwhelmed by the experience. "They weren't bad," he reflected, years later. "John played the lead guitar, but he played it like a banjo with banjo chords, as that was all he knew. None of the others had even as much idea as John about how to play. They were mostly strumming along.

"They played things like *Maggie Mae*, but with the words a bit different. John had done them up himself as he didn't know them all.

"They were playing outdoors in a big field. John was staring around as he was playing, watching everybody. He told me afterwards

When Paul met John: The Quarrymen onstage at the St Peter's Parish Church garden fête in Woolton, Liverpool where the two future Beatles would meet for the first time

that it was the first time he tried sussing an audience, you know, sizing them up, seeing whether it was best to twist a shoulder at them, or best not to move at all.

"I went round to see them afterwards in the Church Hall place. [...] I showed them how to play *Twenty Flight Rock* and told them all the words. They didn't know it. Then I did *Be-Bop-A-Lula*, which they didn't know properly either. Then I did my Little Richard bit, went through me whole repertoire, in fact. I remember this beery old man getting nearer and breathing down me neck as I was playing. 'What's this old drunk doing?' I thought. Then he said *Twenty Flight Rock* was one of his favourites, so I knew he was a connoisseur. It was John. He'd just had a few beers. He was 16 and I was only 14, so he was a big man. I showed him a few more chords he didn't know. Then I left. I felt I'd made a good impression, shown them how good I was."

A couple of weeks later, McCartney joined The Quarrymen, making his live debut with them on 18 October. By that time, they had already featured on a bill at the Cavern Club – a venue soon to become synonymous with The Beatles – after Lennon's girlfriend, Anne, persuaded promoter Alan Sytner to give them a shot. "I wasn't keen," said Sytner, "because my policy was jazz, blues and gospel, and he played skiffle. Still, Anne was persistent, so I eventually said he could play on Wednesday, our dead night, and I'd give him five bob. "They went down alright, but it was hardly a discerning audience. I thought they were pretty useless, just a bunch of kids going through their apprenticeship, doing poor imitations of current pop, Buddy Holly and the like. Even John wasn't much good, except that he had a personality."

The following summer, Lennon's world caved in when his beloved mother, Julia, was hit and killed by a car driven by off-duty policeman Eric Clague. "It was the worst thing that ever happened to me," John said. "We'd caught up so much, me and Julia, in just a few years. We would communicate. We got on. She was great. I thought, 'Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it! That's really fucked everything. I've got no responsibility to anyone now!'"

Despite his devastation, Lennon got on with his life, committing himself fully to The Quarrymen.

The third piece of the jigsaw that would eventually become The Beatles was added in August 1958, with the recruitment of George Harrison. The baby-faced guitarist had been recommended by McCartney, the two of them having bonded together at Liverpool Institute For Boys. Legend has it that Harrison auditioned on the top of a double-decker bus with a note-perfect rendition of Bill Justis' R&B instrumental, *Raunchy*.

Lennon had reservations about his appointment because of Harrison's age – he was weeks shy of his 15th birthday. "It seemed an awful lot at the time," said McCartney. "If we wanted to do anything grown-up, we worried about George looking young. We thought, 'He doesn't shave – can't we get him to look like a grown-up?!'"

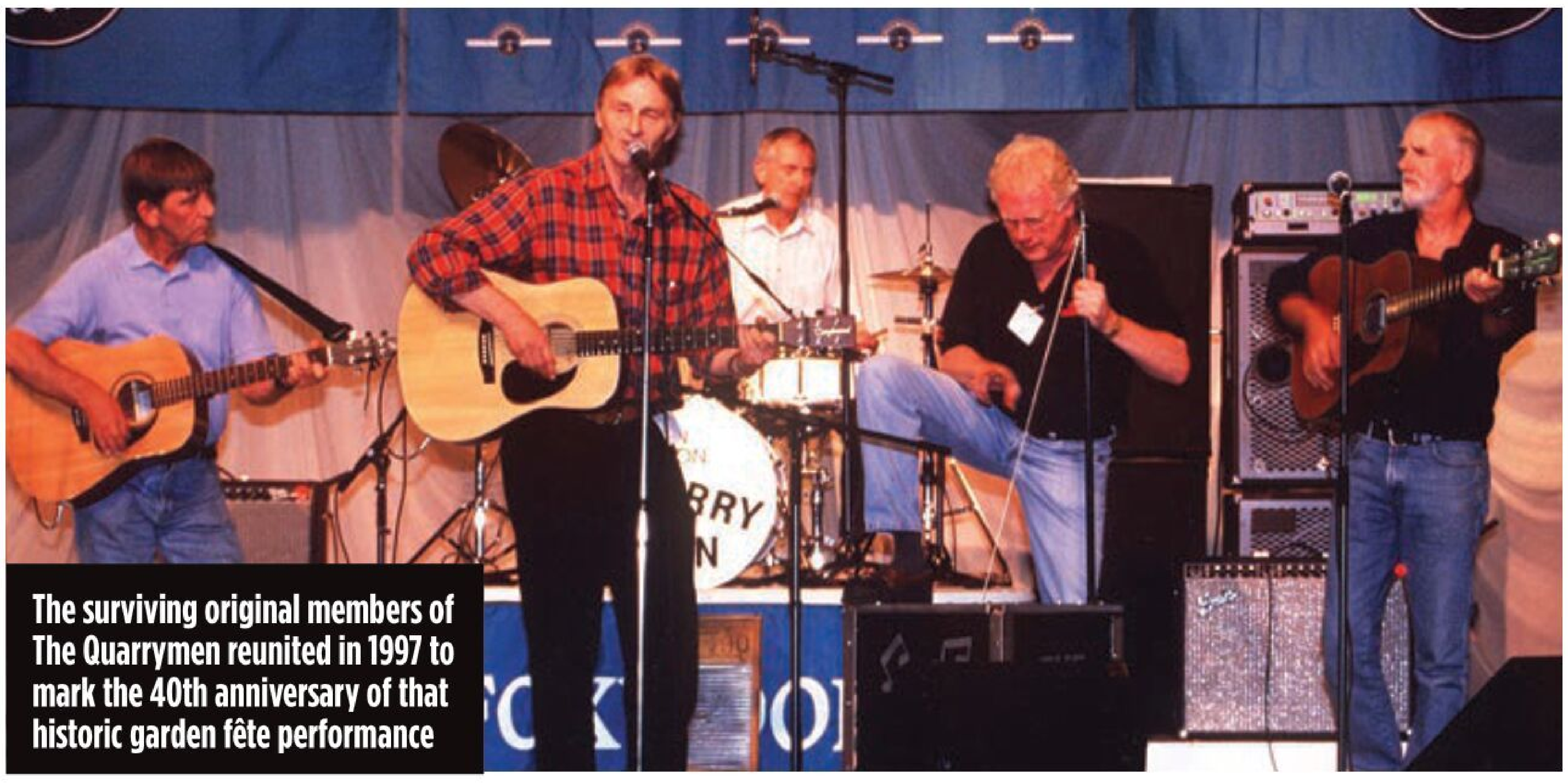
Lennon thought Harrison "looked even younger than Paul – and Paul looked about 10!" But he parked his concerns because of Harrison's prowess, and "because he knew more chords".

With Lennon, McCartney and Harrison now the fulcrum of The Quarrymen (with Colin Hanton and John 'Duff' Lowe), they made the giant leap from rudimentary skiffle to slightly less rudimentary rock'n'roll. In November, they went into a small Liverpudlian studio – essentially the living room of Percy Phillips' Victorian terraced house – to record *That'll Be The Day* backed by McCartney's *In Spite Of All The Danger*, their only original. "It's me doing an Elvis – I'm a bit loathe to say which, but I know which one!" McCartney admitted. "I remember we all went down on the bus with our instruments – amps and guitars – and the drummer went separately. We waited in the waiting room outside while somebody else made their demo, and then it was our turn.

"We just went in the room, hardly saw the fella because he was next door in a little control booth. 'Okay, what are you going to do?' We ran through it very quickly – quarter of an hour and it was all over."

Over, too, was that incarnation of The Quarrymen. Hanton quit after an argument, while Lowe lost contact, reducing the line-up to a trio of guitarists until Pete Best filled in as drummer and Stuart Sutcliffe, an artist pal of Lennon's, took on bass, having shelled out the £60 he'd won in an art competition on a Höfner President. There followed a series of name changes, among them Johnny And The Moondogs, the unwieldy Japage 3, The Rainbows, Long John Silver And The Pieces Of Eight, The Beatals and The Silver Beetles, before The Quarrymen were consigned to history and The Beatles were born. ✶

"They were playing outdoors in a big field. John was staring around as he was playing. He told me afterwards that it was the first time he tried sussing an audience"



The surviving original members of The Quarrymen reunited in 1997 to mark the 40th anniversary of that historic garden fête performance

Rockabilly pioneer: The late, great Johnny Burnette (1934-1964)

© Getty

THE FIRST FAMILY OF ROCK'N'ROLL

Too wild for the charts in 1956, Johnny Burnette And The Rock 'n Roll Trio nevertheless left an indelible mark on music history. Family members Jimmy, Chanti and Diane Burnette discuss the wide-ranging legacy of the rockabilly pioneers...

WORDS BY **DOUGLAS MCPHERSON**

When Johnny and Dorsey Burnette were children, their father gave them each a Gene Autry guitar and told them that if they practised hard and learned to play they might one day sing on the Grand Ole Opry. The brothers responded by smashing the instruments over each other's heads.

"That's a true story!" laughs Dorsey's son, Jimmy. "They got their guitars as Christmas presents and before January they'd beat each other over the heads with them and broke both guitars!"

Forget Jackie Brenston/Ike Turner's *Rocket "88"* and Elvis singing *That's All Right* – the spirit of rockabilly was born right there in the Burnette family lounge with the thwack of splintering wood and twang of distressed strings.

Many years later, in 1956, Johnny Burnette And The Rock 'n Roll Trio laid out the blueprint for every self-respecting rockabilly record recorded since, on one classic self-titled album and half a dozen singles, including *Tear It Up, The Train Kept A-Rollin', Lonesome Train* and *Eager Beaver Baby.*

With Johnny on lead vocals and acoustic guitar, Dorsey on stand-up bass and Paul Burlison on lead guitar, they had the swagger, the echo, the slapping bass and the stinging guitar, all punctuated with random yelps and yells thrown in for no other reason than that the guys were wound up like a spring.

"That was the first rockabilly band," says Johnny's granddaughter Chanti. "That's the story that I've always been told: that they were the groundbreaking band that came up with that sound. Real, authentic to their roots and where they came from in the south. I think they're foundational for rockabilly and for rock'n'roll as well."

> **"All these bands, if they're a rockabilly band, do *Tear It Up*"**

"They were innovators," confirms Chanti's mother, Diane Burnette, the former wife and childhood sweetheart of Johnny's son Rocky.

On the day we speak, Jimmy, Chanti and Diane are star guests at the Wildest Cats In Town weekender, but it's not only their portion of the show that pays tribute to the legacy of the Rock 'n Roll Trio.

"All these bands, if they're a rockabilly band, do *Tear It Up*," Jimmy points out. "They all do one or two songs off the Rock 'n Roll Trio album. Last night we were watching one do *Baby Blue Eyes*, while another closed with *Tear It Up*. Those songs are staples of rockabilly."

Born in Memphis in 1932 (Dorsey) and 1934 (Johnny), the Burnette brothers were wild. So much so that their neighbour and schoolmate Elvis Presley called them 'The Daltons', after the notorious outlaw gang.

By their mid-teens, the brothers were keen boxers and it was at an amateur boxing tournament that Dorsey met another duker, Paul Burlison, who would soon join them in a band initially called the Rhythm Rangers.

They played country and bluegrass with a touch of blues (Burlison's big inspiration as a guitarist was Howlin' Wolf), plus some uptempo swing and boogie for those who wanted to jitterbug.

There's some uncertainty about when the brothers released their first single, *You're Undecided*, on Colonel Sam Thomas' label Von. *The Guinness Book Of Rock Stars* says 1953, which was a year before Elvis made his bow with *That's All Right*, on Sun. Other sources say the disc, which was ➡

Johnny and Dorsey formed the Trio with friend Paul Burlison

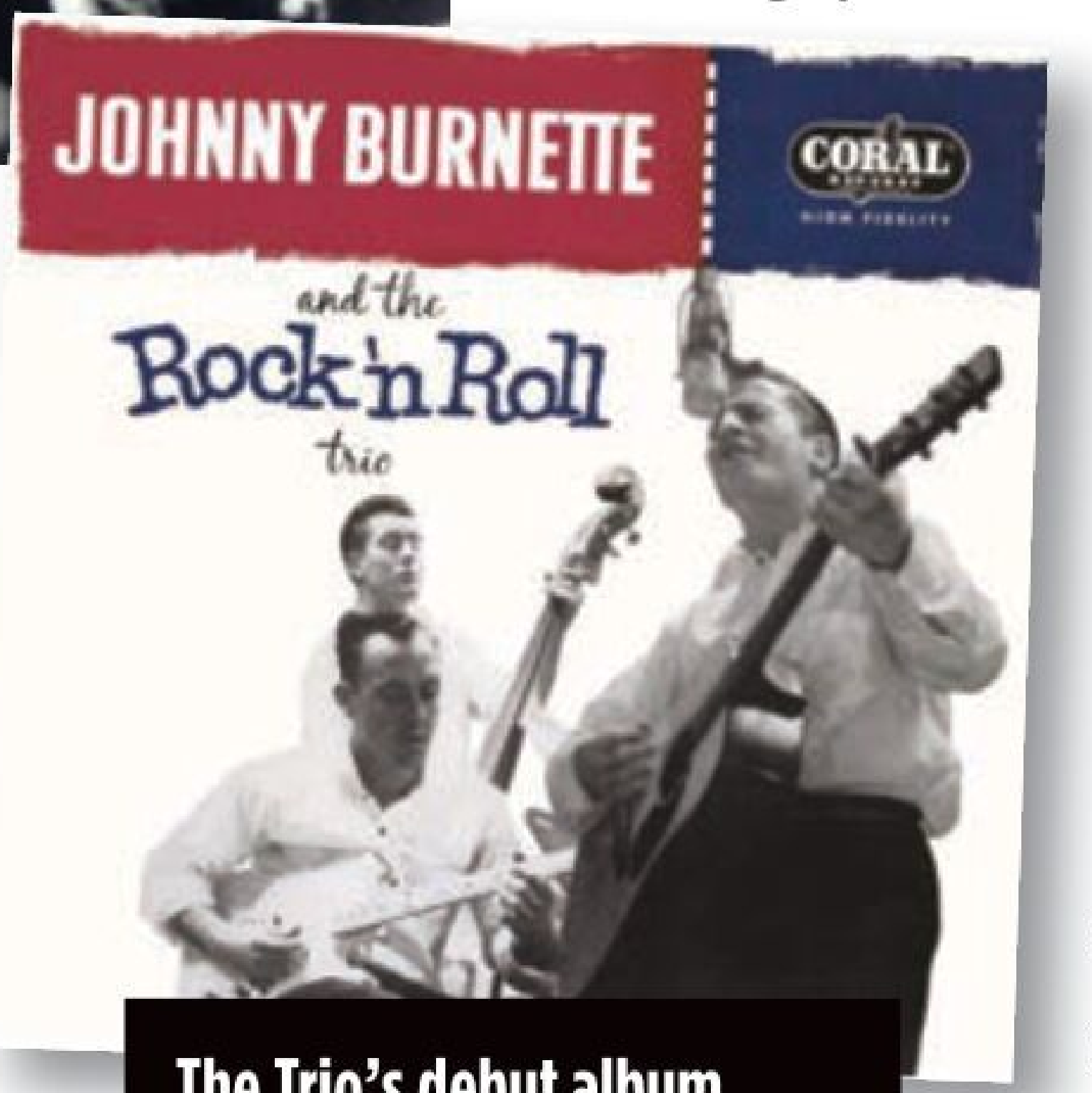
© Getty

solely credited to Johnny Burnette as artist, came out in 1954 or '55. Since it only sold a reported 200 copies no one was paying much attention at the time.

Whenever it was released, the Von recording of *You're Undecided* was not the first rockabilly record. Penned by Dorsey, it was a straight uptempo country track not to be confused with the bluesy, echo-drenched rockabilly remake that the Trio cut during their classic sessions in 1956. The B-side, *Go Mule Go*, was a hillbilly hoedown.

Jerry Naylor, who took over as lead singer of The Crickets following Buddy Holly's death, claims in his book *The Rockabilly Legends: They Called It Rockabilly Long Before They Called It Rock And Roll*, that the Burnettes were responsible for the invention of the word 'rockabilly'.

According to Naylor, Johnny and Dorsey had sons in consecutive months in 1953. Johnny named his son Rocky. Dorsey called his Billy. Dedicating their shows to their boys, they'd introduce a number as "Here's a Rocky 'n' Billy song...' before eventually writing *Rocky 'n' Billy Boogie* or *Rock Billy Boogie*, which prompted their fans to request "that rock-a-billy song..."



The Trio's debut album, released in December 1956, remains a rockabilly classic

WHETHER OR NOT the Burnettes were playing rockabilly before Presley, there's no doubt that they hung out with the future king of rock'n'roll, before any of them were heard of, in the laundry room of the Lauderdale Courts low-income federal housing project where the Presleys and Burnettes both lived. The echoing concrete walls made it the perfect rehearsal space, although relations between Elvis and the Burnettes weren't always cordial.

"Apparently, Dorsey stole Elvis' girlfriend," Chanti says, provoking laughter from Jimmy. "So Elvis was very angry about that!"

"That laundry room was where Elvis first learned how to play guitar," says Jimmy, taking up the story. "One of my dad's friends, Jesse Lee Denson, taught Elvis a few chords. And Elvis, up to the day he died, only knew four or five chords, so those were the ones he was taught there."

When Presley signed to Sun, the Burnettes auditioned for the same label but Sam Phillips turned them down for being too similar to Elvis. Instead, they headed for New York where they auditioned for the Ted Mack-fronted *Original Amateur Hour*. In 1956 – the year Elvis broke worldwide with *Heartbreak Hotel* – they won three of the nationally televised talent shows in a row and were signed to Coral Records.

With recording sessions at the well-appointed Pythian Temple studio in New York, where Bill Haley And His Comets had recorded *Rock Around The Clock*, and Owen Bradley's studio in Nashville, the trio laid down their eponymous – and only – album, *Johnny Burnette & The Rock 'n Roll Trio* with Eddie Gray from the Dick Jacobs Orchestra on drums and

CORAL
RECORD NO.
9-61918
(100,276)*
(2.31)
Vocal With Instrumental Accompaniment
Mitchell Music Corp. (AS)
ROCK BILLY BOOGIE
JOHNNY BURNETTE

Chanti, Jimmy and Diane Burnette at the Wildest Cats Weekender, 2018

Family stories

IT AIN'T ALL ROCK'N'ROLL

Looking back on the Burnette family history, Chanti (daughter of Johnny's son, Rocky) says: "A story that's kind of a tender one for me is when my dad was a little boy. They were getting up in the morning, Johnny, my grandma and Randy, my dad's younger brother, to go to Disneyland.

"My dad ran to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth to wash his face and didn't know Johnny had left his razor blades in the washcloth. He cut his face pretty severely and it affected Johnny so much to see his little boy injured in that way. My grandmother told me that when they got back from the hospital Johnny stayed up all night right next to his bed.

"You hear so much about the Burnettes being roughnecks, but they had a tender side, too. They were all about family."

"Apparently, Dorsey stole Elvis' girlfriend, so Elvis was very angry about that!"

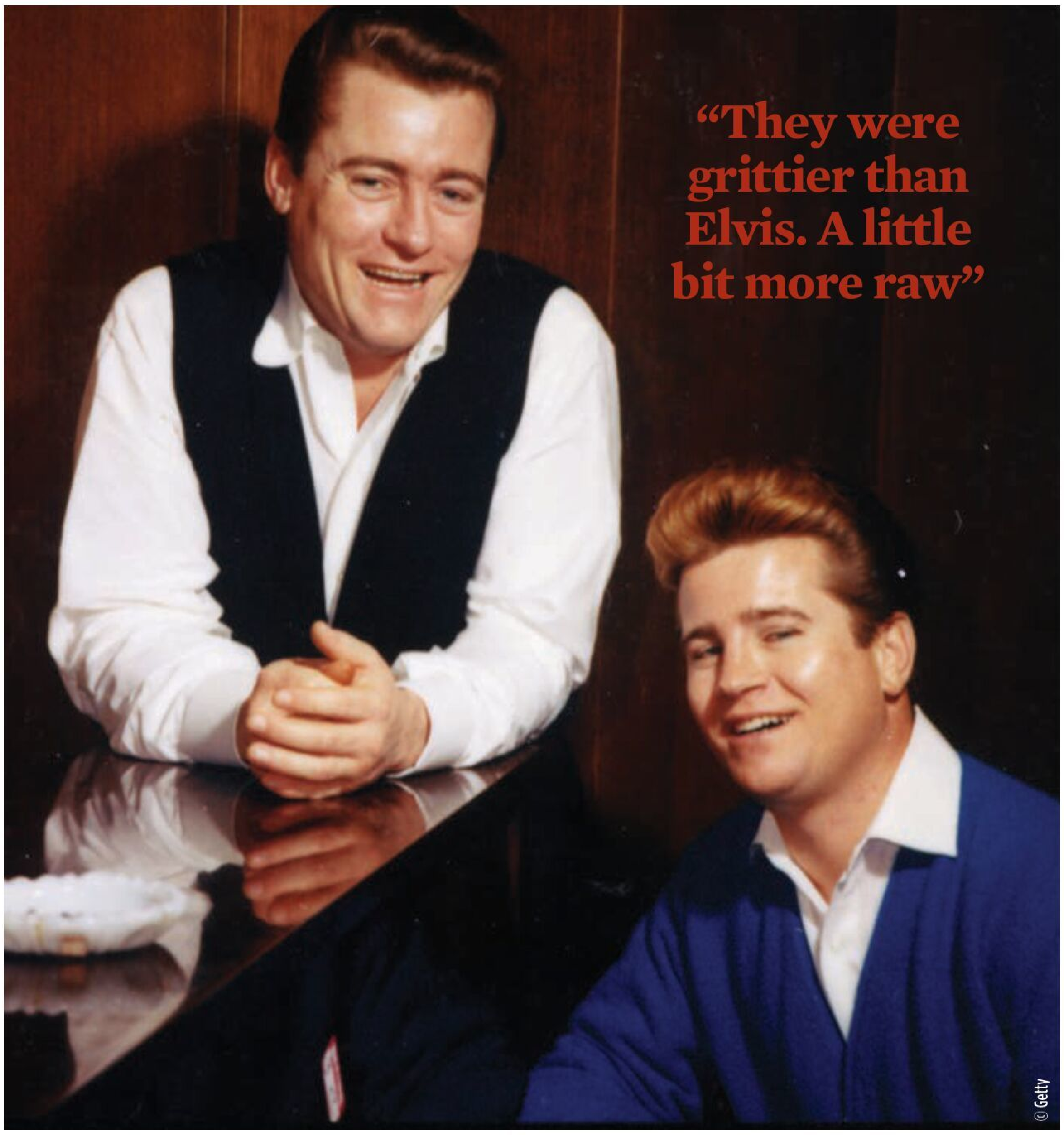
Nashville session legend Grady Martin providing additional guitar work.

From beginning to end it was a classic slice of wax with defining rockabilly interpretations of the blues songs *Honey Hush* and *Train Kept A-Rollin'* alongside originals *Lonesome Tears In My Eyes* and *Your Baby Blue Eyes* (later covered by the Stray Cats).

Everything they touched was rockabilly gold while an appearance in the Alan Freed film *Rock, Rock, Rock*, performing *Lonesome Train*, proved they had an electrifying stage show to back up their records. Exposure was provided on tour with Gene Vincent and Carl Perkins.

So why did none of their singles make the chart at a time when Elvis, Perkins, Vincent and so many others were soaring to the top? Chanti attributes the lack of commercial success to the fact that the Burnettes were too hardcore, musically and personally.

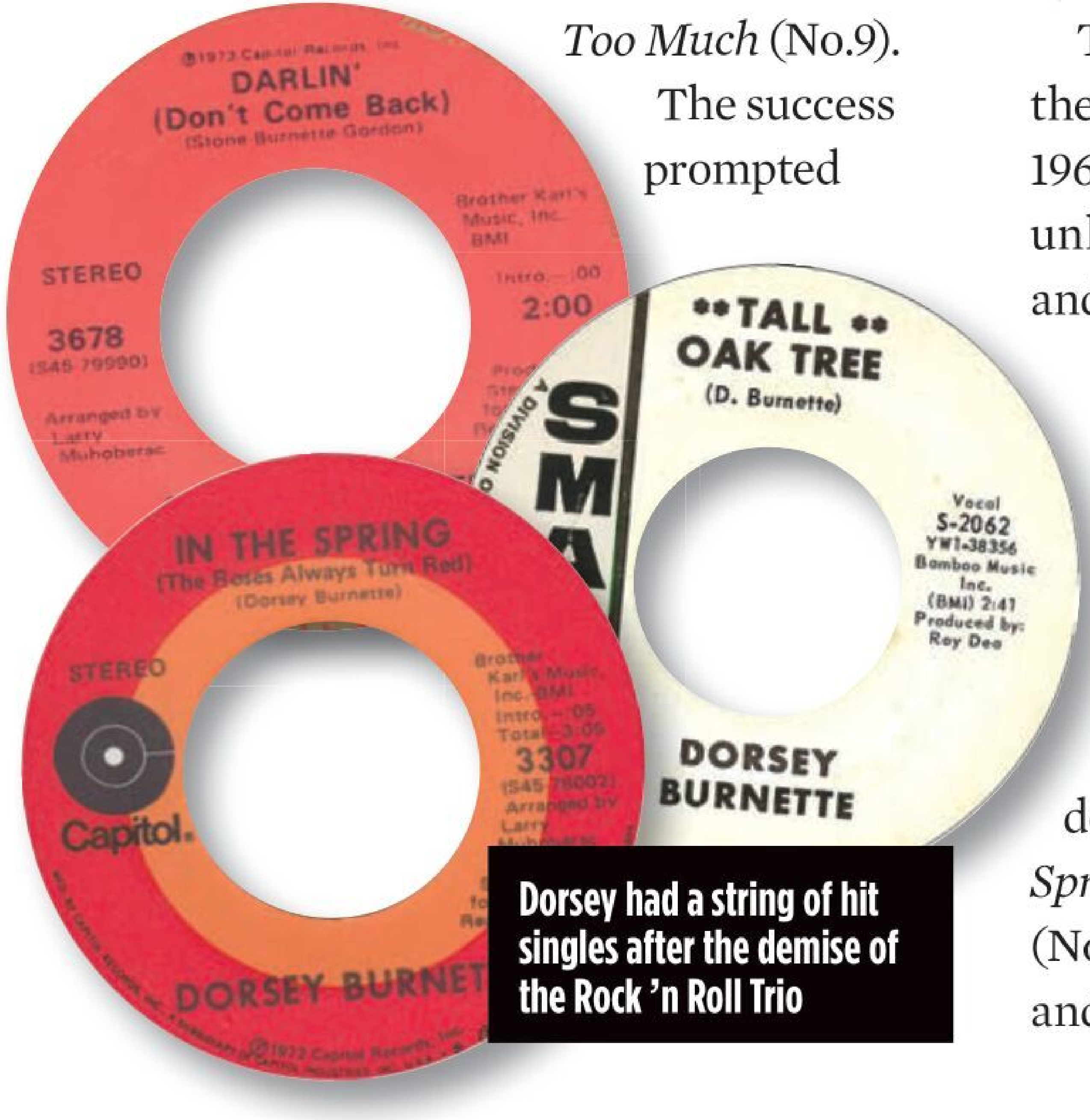
"They were grittier than Elvis. A little bit more raw. Elvis allowed himself to get prettied up and kinda glamorous and lived that life," she says, "and these were boys from the south and they were gonna remain boys from the south until they died. They were roughnecks. They weren't polished. It's not rock'n'roll, it's rockabilly."



"They were grittier than Elvis. A little bit more raw"

© Getty

DISILLUSIONED BY THE lack of chart action, the Trio disbanded in 1957 but the Burnettes went on to find success as songwriters. Having moved to California and camped out on Ricky Nelson's lawn in order to ambush him and present him with their songs, they together and individually wrote a string of hits for the teen idol including *Waitin' In School* (US No.18), *Believe What You Say* (No.4), *It's Late* (No.9) and *Just A Little Too Much* (No.9). The success prompted them to return to recording, this time as solo artists with a softer, more pop-oriented sound.



Dorsey had a string of hit singles after the demise of the Rock 'n Roll Trio

When Nelson turned down the folk-pop ballad *Tall Oak Tree*, Dorsey released it himself and scored his first Top 30 hit, in 1960. In the same year, Johnny hit No.11 in the US and No.5 in the UK with the teen ballad *Dreamin'*. Johnny's follow up with the evergreen *You're Sixteen* was an even bigger smash, hitting No.8 in America and No.3 in Britain. His other hits included the comically maudlin *Clown Shoes*, penned by PJ Proby.

Tragically, Johnny's life was cut short at the age of 30 on the night of 14 August, 1964, when a cabin cruiser ran into his unlit fishing boat on Clear Lake, California, and he drowned.

The loss devastated Dorsey.

"They fought like all brothers do," says Jimmy, "but they loved each other more than anything."

During the 70s, Dorsey focused on country and had a string of minor hits on the country chart throughout the decade with the biggest being *In The Spring (The Roses Always Turn Red)* (No.21), *Darlin' (Don't Come Back)* (No.26) and *Things I Treasure* (No.31).

"I grew up watching my dad play guitar and write songs in the living room," Jimmy recalls. "That was all he did, in his spare time. He was gone a lot, he did a lot of shows, and that was how I grew up."

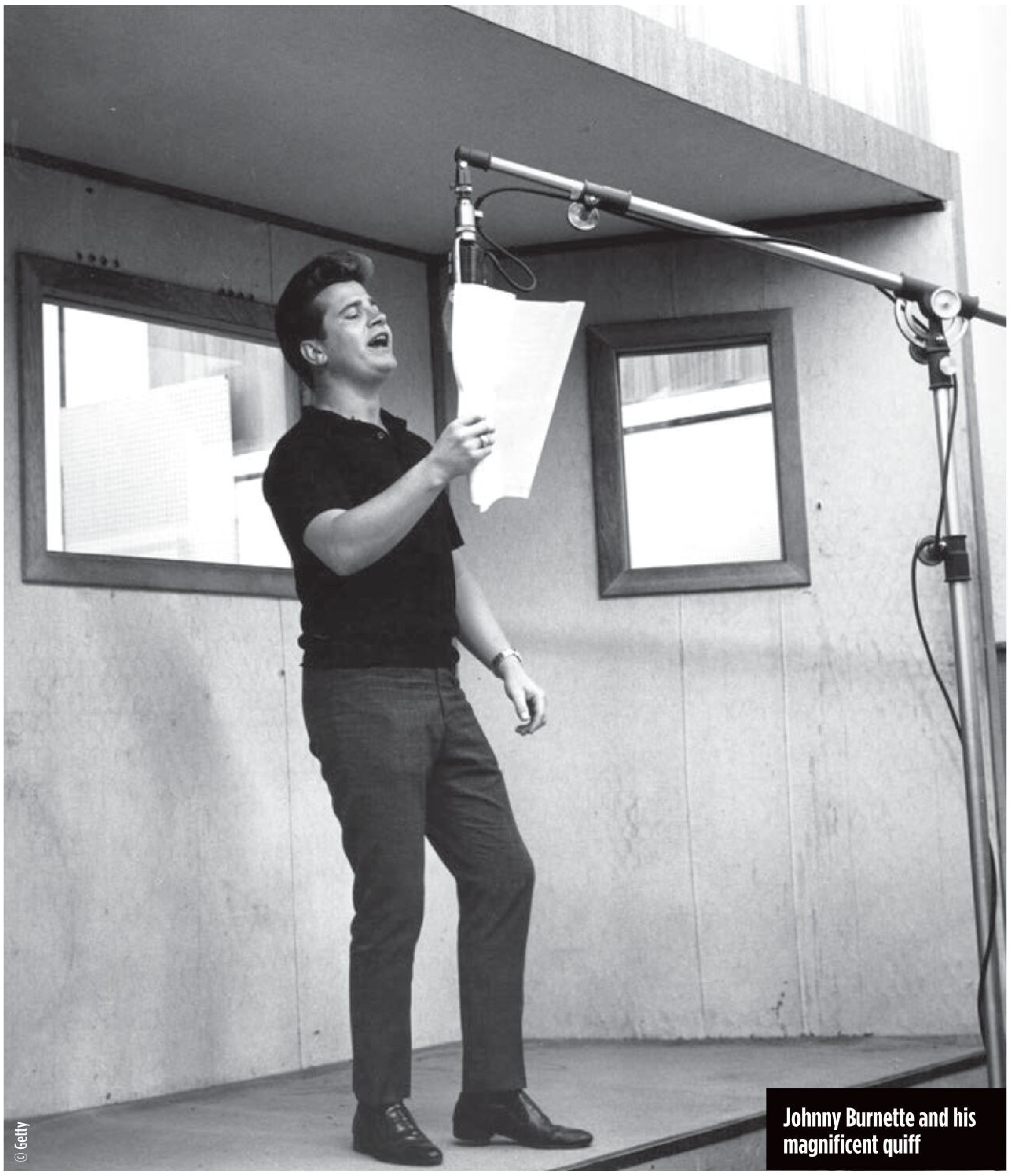
During that period, the Burnettes largely forgot about the recordings of the Rock 'n Roll Trio, unaware of their influence on a generation of musicians across the pond.

IN 1963, THE Beatles sang the Trio's *Lonesome Tears Of My Eyes* live on the radio programme *Pop Go The Beatles*. The performance was released on the 1994 album, *Live At The BBC*, and it was chancing upon the latter that made Chanti fully appreciate the significance of her family's musical legacy.

"They say in the lead-in, 'This is a Dorsey Burnette track, brother of Johnny Burnette...' and the first time I heard that I was like, 'Whoa...! John Lennon said that?' It was a big deal to me as a kid, because The Beatles were the biggest thing. It was like, this is the real deal. These are legends to the legends."

Jimmy finds the clip on his phone and the cheeky chappy voice of John Lennon suddenly fills the room: "This is a

➨


© Getty

Johnny Burnette and his magnificent quiff

Dorsey Burnette number, brother of Johnny Burnette, called *Lonesome Tears of My Eyes*, recorded on their very first LP... in 1822!"

"That was huge for me, because I've always been a big Beatles fan," Jimmy enthuses. "Then, later, Rod Stewart did *Tear It Up* on his *Tonight I'm Yours* album and for the next two or three years he would close all his shows with *Tear It Up*. Because *Tear It Up* is a show closer."

The Yardbirds, Aerosmith and Motörhead all covered *Train Kept A-Rollin'* in the 60s and 70s, while Led Zeppelin adopted it as a concert opener. Ringo Starr topped the chart with a cover of *You're Sixteen* in 1974. Jimmy Page, meanwhile, invited Dorsey to play on a Led Zeppelin album.

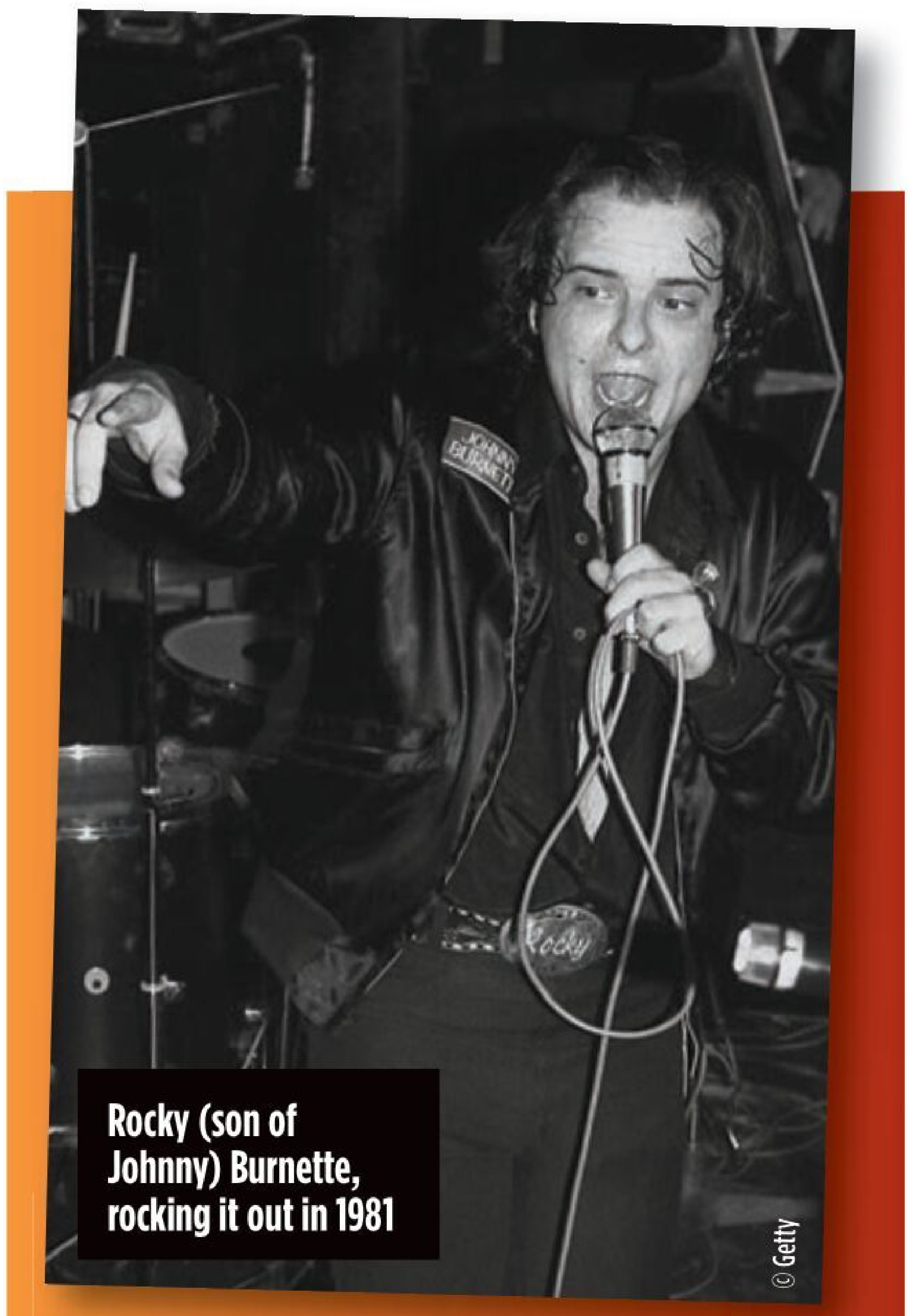
"My dad was like, 'Who's Led Zeppelin?'" Jimmy laughs. "At the time I didn't know, but my brother Billy was hip to it and tried to talk dad into it. But by the time he got around to saying that he would do it, he passed away."

CORAL
Vocal With Instrumental Accompaniment
RECORD NO. 9-61651 (89911)+
TEAR IT UP
JOHNNY BURNETTE AND THE ROCK 'N ROLL TRIO

Tear It Up has become a rockabilly staple since its release in 1956

Dorsey Burnette died of a heart attack on 19 August 1979, aged just 46. It's a consolation to Jimmy that his father lived long enough to see the Rock 'n Roll Trio rediscovered by record collectors during the European rockabilly revival of the late 70s. When the Stray Cats took rockabilly back to the charts in the 80s it was with a sound and swagger almost identical to the Burnettes.

"Right before my dad died it got real popular, and he was as surprised as all of us were," Jimmy continues. "It was an album he had done 20 years earlier, and he found out just before he died that it was very popular over here and that the entire British Invasion was people that were listening to his music in the 50s. That's when he started doing *Tear It Up* in his sets, and doing some rockabilly, because before that he was doing all country. He didn't do any Rock 'n Roll Trio stuff until about two years before he died. In his last shows, he'd close with *Tear It Up*. It was a toe-tapper that got the crowd going." ✶


© Getty

Rocky (son of Johnny) Burnette, rocking it out in 1981

It's a family affair

The sons of Johnny and Dorsey Burnette grew up surrounded by music. Family friends included the country singers Roger Miller, Glen Campbell and Buck Owens.

"We went fishing with Charlie Rich a couple of times," recalls Dorsey's son Jimmy, who formed a band with Glen Campbell's son, Travis Campbell, on drums in the 1980s.

The most prominent of the second generation of Burnettes, Dorsey's oldest son Billy, began his recording career at the age of five when he appeared with Rick Nelson on *Hey Daddy (I'm Gonna Tell Santa On You)*.

In 1972, he released his first album, *Billy Burnette*, and at the height of the rockabilly revival in 1980 recorded *another* album called *Billy Burnette* that included covers of the Rock 'n Roll Trio songs *Honey Hush* and *Tear It Up*.

In 1987, Billy replaced guitarist Lindsey Buckingham in Fleetwood Mac and wrote two songs, *Hard Feelings* and *When It Comes To Love*, on the band's album *Behind The Mask*, as well as co-writing three more.

Johnny Burnette's son Rocky is also no stranger to the charts, and launched his musical career in 1979 with the album *The Son Of Rock'n'Roll*. His biggest hit, 1980's *Tired Of Toein' The Line*, sounded uncannily like a Shakin' Stevens record, vocally and musically, which perhaps shot down its chances in the UK while it soared into the Top 10 in America and hit No.1 in Australia.

Jimmy, Chanti and Diane Burnette are not professionally involved in music but increasingly make personal appearances to keep alive the legacy of Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'n Roll Trio.

GENE VINCENT
CELEBRATING THE LEGACY OF THE ULTIMATE REBEL

THE SHADOWS
LEADERS OF THE BRIT STRAT PACK

DON EVERLY
FAREWELL TO AN ICON OF ROCK'N'ROLL

VINTAGE★ROCK

HAIL! HAIL! ROCK'N'ROLL! THE MUS , THE LIFESTYLE, THE MEMORIES...

ELVIS PRESLEY
HIS LANDMARK STADIUM ROCK CONCERT

PLUS
ACE RECORDS
DICKIE PRIDE
JIMMY SWEENEY
RICKY NELSON
THE SWEET INSPIRATIONS

ON SALE NOW!

BRIAN SETZER
"I MISSED THE RUMBLE!"
THE STRAY CAT LEGEND FEELS THE NEED FOR SPEED ON HIS HOT-ROD INSPIRED NEW SOLO ALBUM

"THE SONGS YOU HEAR ARE TRULY MY LIFE STORY"
WANDA JACKSON BOWS OUT WITH FINAL LP ENCORE

Available in WH Smith and all good newsagents*
or online at shop.vintagerockmag.com

*Also available at Barnes & Noble USA and import stockists worldwide

ANTHEM
HAPPIER HEALTHIER LIVING
PUBLISHING

Ray
ntho
Ray
thony

The Girl Can't Help It **grossed over $6 million and had a profound influence on youth culture**

© Getty

IN LIVING COLOUR

It's the movie that brought us our favourite 50s rock'n'rollers in glorious full colour. Now, 65 years on from its release, we look back at the legacy of Frank Tashlin's 1956 flick *The Girl Can't Help It*

WORDS BY **STEVE O'BRIEN**

Look up Eddie Cochran or Gene Vincent on YouTube and you'll find a miserably short list of foggy monochrome TV recordings that make these two icons of the 1950s seem as historically distant as Charlie Chaplin or Edward VII. But type in 'Eddie Cochran' and 'The Girl Can't Help It' and there the late rocker is, in full glorious colour and in high-definition, as vivid and alive as he was in 1956.

Thank the maker, then, for *The Girl Can't Help It*. Frank Tashlin's movie may not have won rapturous write-ups at the time, but, 65 years on from its release, this cult rock'n'roll comedy is now rightly celebrated as a classic of its genre – and a cherishable record of a precious time in pop culture.

"It's still *the* great music film," Paul McCartney once enthused. "They had only treated music films as B-pictures up till then, or used the music just as a theme tune, as in *Blackboard Jungle*. Or those little black and white productions with Alan Freed as the personality, and lots of what they thought were 'Black acts'... We idolised these people and always thought they were given crummy treatment – until *The Girl Can't Help It*."

While grown-up critics may have savaged the movie on its release, it was passionately embraced by the younger set, hungry as they were to see the culture they were living up there on the big screen. Sure, there'd been rock'n'roll flicks before *The Girl Can't Help It*, but never before had so many of the era's starriest names been collected together in just one film, and in colour, too. When actor Tom Ewell appears at the beginning of the movie, it's in black and white and in the old 4.3 television ratio. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announces, "this motion picture was photographed in the grandeur of Cinescope," before looking around and then flicking left and right as the picture opens out into widescreen. "And with gorgeous life-like colour by De Luxe," he adds, as the monochrome screen suddenly floods with oranges and blues. According to McCartney, who saw the film when he was just 14 years old, that opening sequence was "the most fantastic trick ever".

Much has been made over the years of this movie's importance in the story of The Beatles. It's said it inspired John Lennon to pick up his first guitar and that it was Macca's approximation of Eddie Cochran's performance of *Twenty Flight Rock* from the film that sealed his place in The Quarrymen. It was clearly a movie that was so critical to the Fabs that, on 18 September 1968, they purposely rescheduled the recording of *Birthday* from *'The White Album'* simply so they could watch the British TV premiere of *The Girl Can't Help It*. As Beatles historian Mark Lewisohn wrote: "It is impossible to overestimate the impact made by *The Girl Can't Help It* on Liverpool teenagers."

McCartney had a point when he suggested that, before *The Girl Can't Help It*, the big screen's flirtation with the emerging rock'n'roll scene was either half-hearted, patronising or exploitative. There's none of that in Frank Tashlin's picture. Rock'n'roll is woven into the very fabric of the movie, and even the older characters are in thrall to this musical revolution. "Okay, so Jerri can't sing," says the fortysomething 'Fats' Murdock after showing his apparently tone-deaf girlfriend a clip of Eddie Cochran on TV. "Well that guy ain't got a trained voice either and he's one of the top record stars in the country. Why? 'Cause he's got a new sound!"

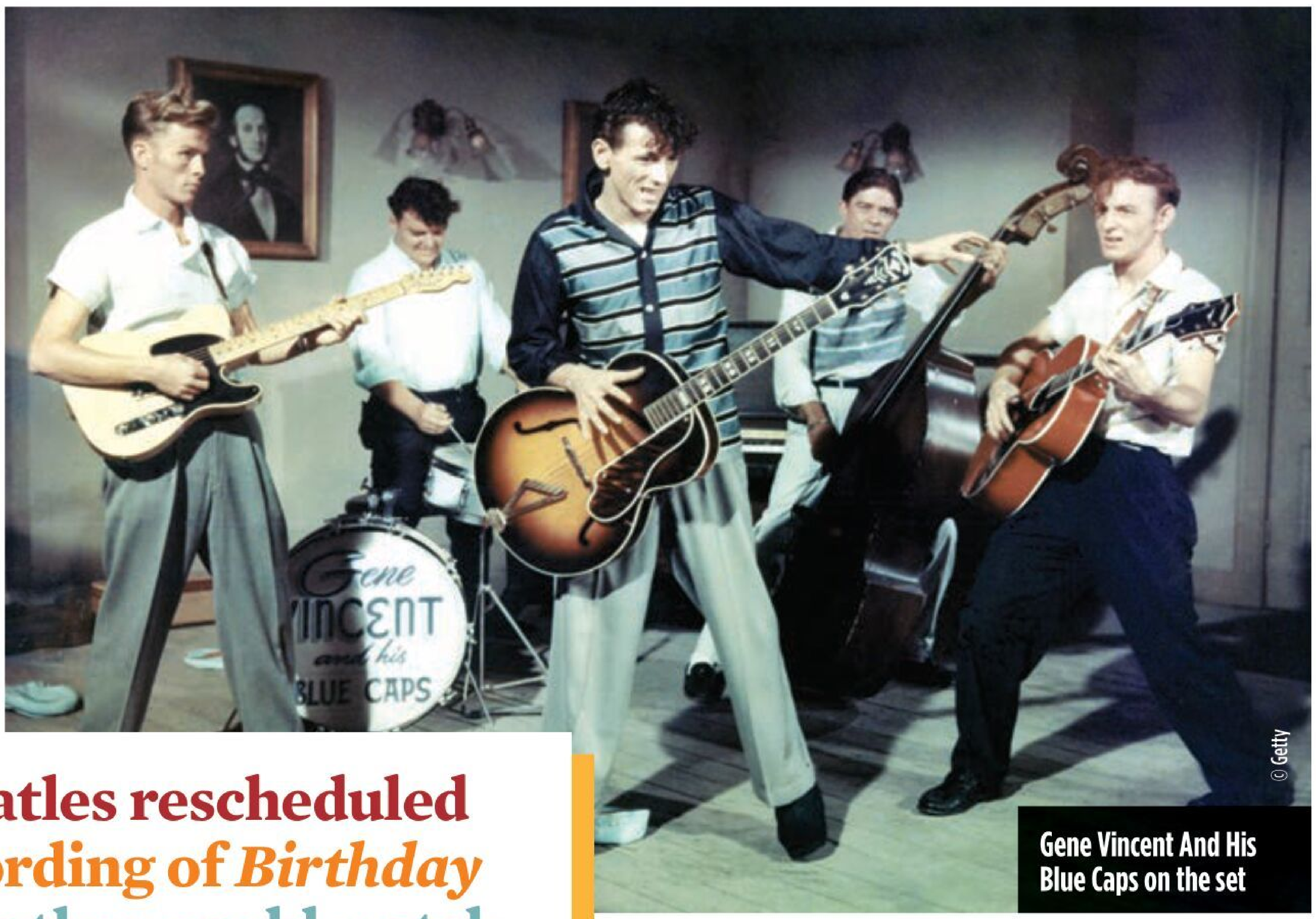
LITTLE RICHARD

FAST FILM FACTS

1 The wedding dress that Jayne Mansfield wears at the end of the film was, two years later, loaned to her to use on her real-life wedding day with body-builder Mickey Hargitay.

2 Two uncredited songwriters on *The Girl Can't Help It*, Hugo Friedhofer and Lionel Newman (father of film composer Thomas Newman), also wrote music for the Elvis Presley movie, *Love Me Tender*, released in 1956.

3 When Abbey Lincoln is performing *Spread The Word* in the nightclub scene with Jayne Mansfield and Tom Ewell, she's wearing a costume worn by Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* three years before. Another costume from that film appears later, when Ewell passes a chorus girl on the stairs. She's wearing the dress Jane Russell wore when she sang *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend*.


© Getty

Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps on the set

The movie showcases many of the biggest and buzziest recording names of the time, including Little Richard, Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps, Fats Domino, The Platters, The Treniers and Eddie Fontaine. And, generally speaking, they're not relegated to the background either. There are no teases of tracks in *The Girl Can't Help It*. If you were a fan of Little Richard's *Ready Teddy* or Fats Domino's *Blue Monday*, you were getting almost the full song in this film, which, at a time when TV appearances from black artists were rare, makes *The Girl Can't Help It* one of the most culturally valuable movies of the 1950s.

Of course, one stellar name is conspicuous by his absence. Fox certainly wanted Elvis Presley for the picture, but Colonel Tom Parker demanded £50,000 for his boy to sing two songs. The studio's Head Of Production Buddy Adler erred. Parker made them an offer – he would flip a coin. Heads, Fox gets Elvis for free *and* a third song; tails, Fox coughs up £100,000. Adler declined the offer.

The Beatles rescheduled the recording of *Birthday* simply so they could watch the British TV premiere of *The Girl Can't Help It*

© Getty

Little Richard belting out his performance of *Ready Teddy*

One person who believed Fox had made a mistake in not agreeing to Parker's demands was the film's star Jayne Mansfield. It can't be underestimated how crucial the 23-year-old actress was to the success of *The Girl Can't Help It*. Unfairly maligned as a kind of poundshop Marilyn Monroe, Mansfield had made a name for herself on Broadway the year before with the satirical play *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* Beyond her obvious assets ("Jayne Mansfield and her cantilevered cleavage – what more do young teenagers want?" recalled a still lust-struck Paul McCartney many years later), the actress brings effortless warmth to the role of Jerri, whose dreams of domestic bliss are cruelly ignored by her Svengali boyfriend whose only ambition is to make her into a star, despite her apparent lack of any talent. The film has fun with the paralysing effect Mansfield's beauty had on men. Tashlin's background as a *Looney Tunes* animator is clearly on show with moments like that when a man's glasses crack as she shimmies up the stairs and when a milkman's bottle overspills as she passes, in a lewd visual joke that might have been considered too on-the-nose even for the Carry Ons.

It's fascinating how prescient much of *The Girl Can't Help It* seems now, in an age where the pursuit of celebrity more than ever has little to do with talent or achievement. When Murdock asks agent Tom Miller to make Jerri into a star, he's tasked with simply showing her off around town, telling her: "Don't say anything, just say, 'Ask my agent'." It's only later that Miller discovers quite how little talent his new project has. Visiting a rehearsal studio, he sets out to ascertain how good a singer she is. Alarmingly, her voice is so wretched it shatters lightbulbs.

Jerri's lack of vocal prowess doesn't deter Murdock, however, and he digs out a song that he penned while in the joint, *Rock Around The Rockpile*. Jerri's job on the track is to deliver the sound of a prison siren, and when it's completed Murdock asks Miller to tout it around.

Taking the record to Chicago in an attempt to get it on the country's

➨

4 Along with 1957's *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, this was the first of two comedies that Frank Tashlin directed which headlined Jayne Mansfield. He's quoted as saying: "There's nothing in the world to me that's funnier than big breasts".

5 When Jerri performs with her own singing voice at the end of the picture, it's really singer Eileen Wilson that we're hearing. She also dubbed Ava Gardner in the films *One Touch Of Venus* and *The Hucksters* and Barbara Bel Geddes in *The Five Pennies*.

6 One surprise fan is director Wim Wenders. He told *Film Comment* magazine in 1992: "This is my definitive guilty pleasure. It's actually a terribly stupid movie, with a story you would shudder to tell, Jayne Mansfield is such a non-actress; she's just a ploy, pretext or gimmick to get you from one rock'n'roll event to another. But you get to see Gene Vincent, Little Richard, Eddie Cochran – these unbelievable musicians who don't exist on 35mm otherwise."

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Five of the most sizzling performances from the movie…

READY TEDDY LITTLE RICHARD

Specialty
45 R.P.M.
SP-579-45
Pub: Venice-BMI Time: 2:05
READY TEDDY
(Blackwell-Marascalco)
LITTLE RICHARD
And His Band

Standing at the piano, an impossibly youthful Little Richard belts out this rock'n'roll standard that can be found as the B-side to his 1956 hit *Rip It Up*.

CRY ME A RIVER JULIE LONDON

Julie London had her big break in the movie, starring as the singer that slipped through Tom Miller's fingers. Originally written in the early 50s for Ella Fitzgerald for the film *Pete Kelly's Blues*, *Cry Me A River* was eventually recorded by London in 1955.

BE-BOP-A-LULA GENE VINCENT AND HIS BLUE CAPS

Capitol
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.
Lowery Enterprises
BMI-2:31
F3450
Vocal with Instrumental Accompaniment
(45-15230)
BE-BOP-A-LULA
(Sheriff Tex Davis-Gene Vincent)
GENE VINCENT
and His Blue Caps

Gene Vincent gives it his all in this electrifying performance of his signature hit. It had been released just six months previously, reaching No.7 on the Billboard chart.

TWENTY FLIGHT ROCK EDDIE COCHRAN

Eddie was just 18 when he delivered this much-imitated performance of his classic track. With his shoulders hunched and a little too much makeup on his face, he bashes away at his Gretsch G6120, giving us a movie clip that would go down in history.

BLUE MONDAY FATS DOMINO

Like all the songs here, *Blue Monday* was a recent release for Fats Domino when he performed it for *The Girl Can't Help It*. It was one of the earliest R&B songs to make the Billboard chart, peaking at No.5 and reaching No.1 on the R&B Best Sellers chart.

The Girl Can't Help It played a pivotal role in Jayne Mansfield's movie career

© Getty

> ***The Girl Can't Help It*** **went on to gross considerably more than any rock'n'roll movie before – it's influence was profound.**

Mansfield with Edmond O'Brien and Tom Ewell

jukeboxes, Miller soon discovers that the person he's talking to, jukebox king Wheeler, is an old rival of Murdock's, who refuses to playlist the song. Undeterred, Murdock simply muscles in on Wheeler's business, replacing his old adversary's jukeboxes with his own.

And – what do you know – the song becomes a giant hit and the film climaxes with Jerri taking to the stage at the Rock And Roll Jubilee and revealing a dazzlingly beautiful singing voice. "I always could sing," Jerri confesses to Miller afterwards. "I thought if I was real awful, I'd get out of owing him."

Against a budget of $1,310,000, *The Girl Can't Help It* went on to gross $6,250,000 – considerably more than any rock'n'roll movie before it, including *Rock Around The Clock*, which had premiered nine months earlier. Its influence was profound. It's clear that director Richard Thorpe was watching, because the iconic *Jailhouse Rock* sequence from the film of the same name – released one year later – has striking similarities to the *Rock Around The Rockpile* finale of *The Girl Can't Help It*. And, as Mark Lewisohn pointed out, it can't be overstated quite how seismic the movie was for young people in the 50s. Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, both later of The Yardbirds, have spoken of their love of *The Girl Can't Help It*, with Beck calling it "the best rock'n'roll movie ever filmed".

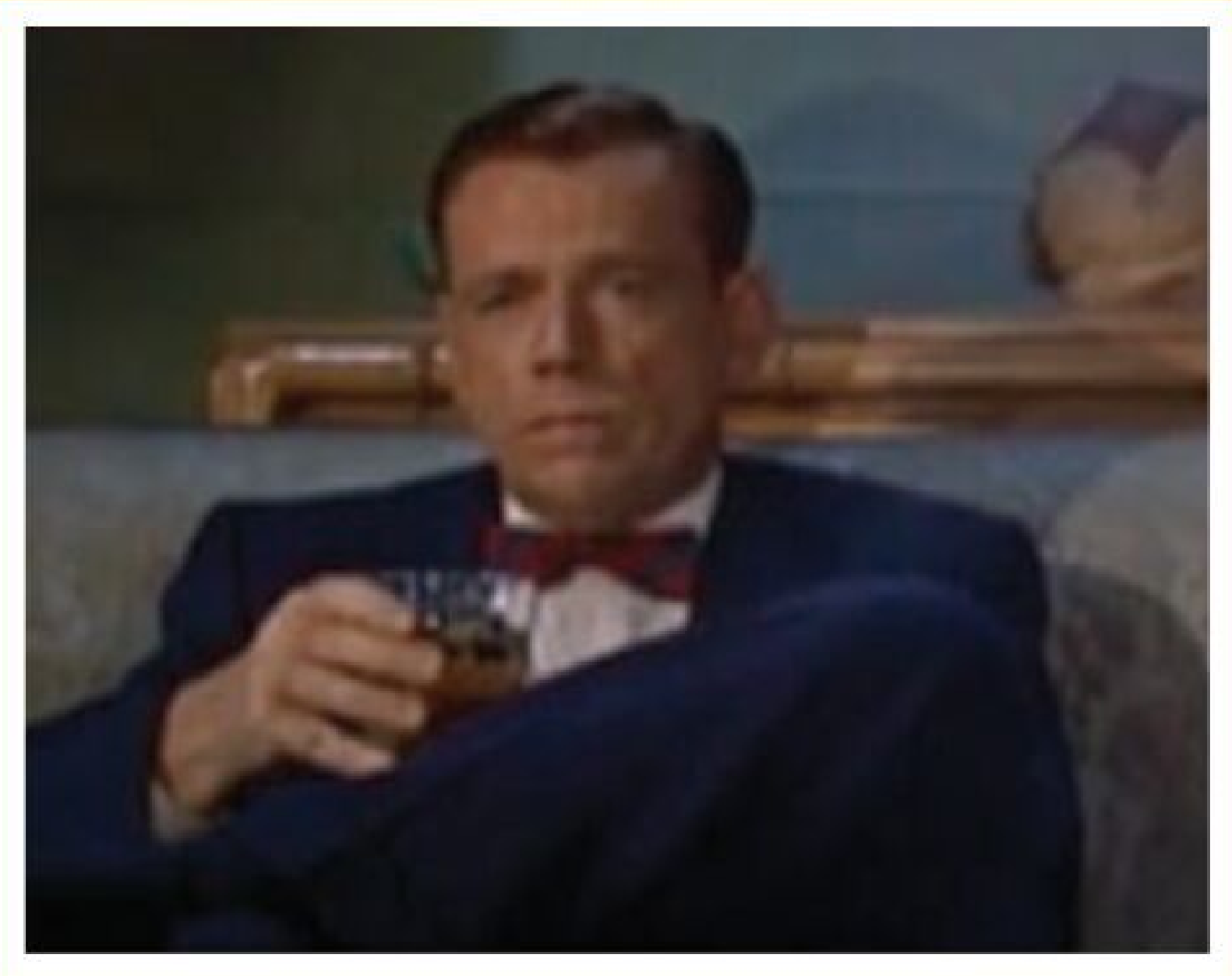
The film also made Jayne Mansfield a bona fide star and one of the most enduring sex symbols of the 20th century. She brings real heart and a touching sweetness to the role of Jerri, and often acts her more seasoned co-stars off the screen.

But, above all, it's for its music that the film is remembered. In 1956, it brought rock'n'roll's most exciting names to the attention of millions. It delivered the thrills, the glamour and the voltage of American music right into the laps of rock-thirsty British teens. And 65 years on, it's a pristine, 35mm snapshot of one of the most important years in rock'n'roll history. The adults might have sneered at *The Girl Can't Help It* in 1956, but, as ever, what did they know? ✶

THE PLAYERS

Jayne Mansfield (Jerri Jordan)

Born in Pennsylvania in 1933, Jayne Mansfield first made a splash as one of *Playboy* magazine's Playmates Of The Month. After starring in the stage production of *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* in 1955, she was offered a six-year contract by Twentieth Century Fox. Her career declined in the 60s and she died in 1967 after a car crash.



Tom Ewell (Tom Miller)

Most famous for his role opposite Marilyn Monroe in 1955's *The Seven Year Itch*, Ewell was more of a stage actor than a film one, though he continued to perform on the big and small screen until his retirement in 1986. He died in 1994 at the age of 85.

Edmond O'Brien (Fats Murdock)

As a child, O'Brien put on magic shows for fellow kids in his neighbourhood after being taught by his neighbour, Harry Houdini. As a grown-up, Edmond would become one of the most reliable supporting actors of his generation, scooping an Oscar in 1955 for *The Barefoot Contessa*. He died in 1985.

Barry Gordon (Barry the paperboy)

Just eight years old at the time of filming *The Girl Can't Help It*, Gordon (who almost steals the movie with the line, "If she's a girl, I don't know what my sister is!") later went on to become the longest-serving president (1988 to 1995) of the Screen Actors Guild. He also voiced Donatello in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoons and is currently the host of Pasadena's talk news show, *NewsRap*.

Ray Anthony (Himself)

Ray Anthony, who sings the single version of *Rock Around The Rockpile* in the movie, played in Glenn Miller's band from 1940-41 and as bandleader of The Ray Anthony Orchestra, enjoying hits in the early 50s with *The Bunny Hop*, *Hokey Pokey* and the theme from *Dragnet*. He celebrated his 99th birthday on 20 January.

John Emery (Wheeler)

Emery played Murdock's old slot machine rival Wheeler in the film. An actor since the 1930s, he also starred in movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and 1948's *The Woman In White*. A former husband of Tallulah Bankhead, he died in 1964 shortly after completing his final film, *Youngblood Hawke*.

BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS

In May 1955, a young singer released his first single on Sun Records, *Hey, Porter!* It immediately announced Johnny Cash as a new breed of country and western star...

WORDS BY **BILL DAHL**

Sun founder Sam Phillips was a maverick in the very best sense of the term. He brashly established his Memphis-based label on a steady diet of blues and a little bit of country while always searching for new artists and fresh sounds that he could shape into the next big thing. In deep-voiced Johnny Cash, whose stark, stripped-down concept of country music sounded precious little like that of anyone featured on the Grand Ole Opry (or anywhere else for that matter, including at Sun), wily Sam discovered a true original, just as he had with Elvis and Carl Perkins – and, long before them, Howlin' Wolf.

Cash only nominally fitted in with the rockabilly uprising that Presley had ignited at Sun. He was too serious, too grounded, too sincere. Johnny and his Tennessee Two – lead guitarist Luther Perkins and upright bassist Marshall Grant – made music that resonated with the common man across the fields and farms and juke joints of the American South. Nothing fancy or ribald, just good, honest country music that was easily accessible and altogether believable.

Cash was born J.R. Cash ("Johnny" came later) in rural Kingsland, Arkansas on 26 February 1932. He grew up from the age of three on his father's newly-built farm in Dyess, Arkansas, singing spirituals while toiling in the cotton fields alongside his mother and siblings during the never-ending cycle of planting and harvesting that he later immortalized in his 1958 song *Pickin' Time*. The loss of his beloved older brother Jack in a horrific accident involving a table saw impacted the lad mightily, but he eventually rebounded from the tragedy and got on with his life.

Music was always a major part of J.R.'s world. In addition to the gospel he heard every Sunday in church, Cash deftly adjusted the tuner on his large family's battery-powered Sears Roebuck radio to pick up the far-off voices of country icons Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, and Ernest Tubb that crackled over the frequencies. He delighted in live remotes from the Opry and the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and the Wheeling Jamboree as well as the Louvin' Brothers' 15-minute daily over WMPS in Memphis. There were also rousing hymns from sanctified African-American chanteuse Sister Rosetta Tharpe to be savoured.

HOW I GOT TO MEMPHIS

Good jobs were scarce for a young man in his late teens, so after graduating from high school, Cash joined the Air Force, developing into an expert radio intercept operator over the course of his 1950-'54 service stint. While stationed in Germany, he harmonised with three other servicemen as the Landsberg Barbarians. That's when Johnny bought his first guitar for the equivalent of five dollars, lugging it back four miles to his barracks through knee-deep snow.

The boy from Arkansas: the young, pre-'Johnny' J.R. Cash, the fourth of seven children, pictured in the late 1930s

© Alamy

Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash with his guitar foil, the inimitable – and immovable – Luther Perkins

© Getty

Cash with bassist Marshall Grant, the other half of his backing band The Tennessee Two

© Getty

Following his discharge, Cash and his new bride Vivian (the sister of Ray Liberto, who would cut rockabilly for San Antonio's TNT Records) settled in Memphis. Johnny was an absolute disaster as a door-to-door appliance salesman for the Home Equipment Company (the firm nonetheless sponsored a radio programme Cash and his boys briefly hosted over KWEM in West Memphis, Arkansas), but his older brother Roy worked at Automobile Sales Company Service with Luther and Marshall. He introduced them to Johnny so they could get together and do a little playing in their off hours.

The band's combined lack of musical experience actually worked in their favour. Luther was technically limited on his guitar, but his rudimentary riffs on the low strings certainly complemented Cash's craggy baritone and sturdy acoustic rhythm guitar. Once Luther mastered a lick, he never forgot it (his unique minimalist approach was immortalised in Johnny's droll '55 Sun side *Luther Played The Boogie*). With Grant slapping his doghouse bass, they made for a perfectly matched trio.

SUN
Hi Lo Music
BMI
221
Vocal
U-151
CRY! CRY! CRY!
(Cash)
JOHNNY CASH
and the
TENNESSEE TWO
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

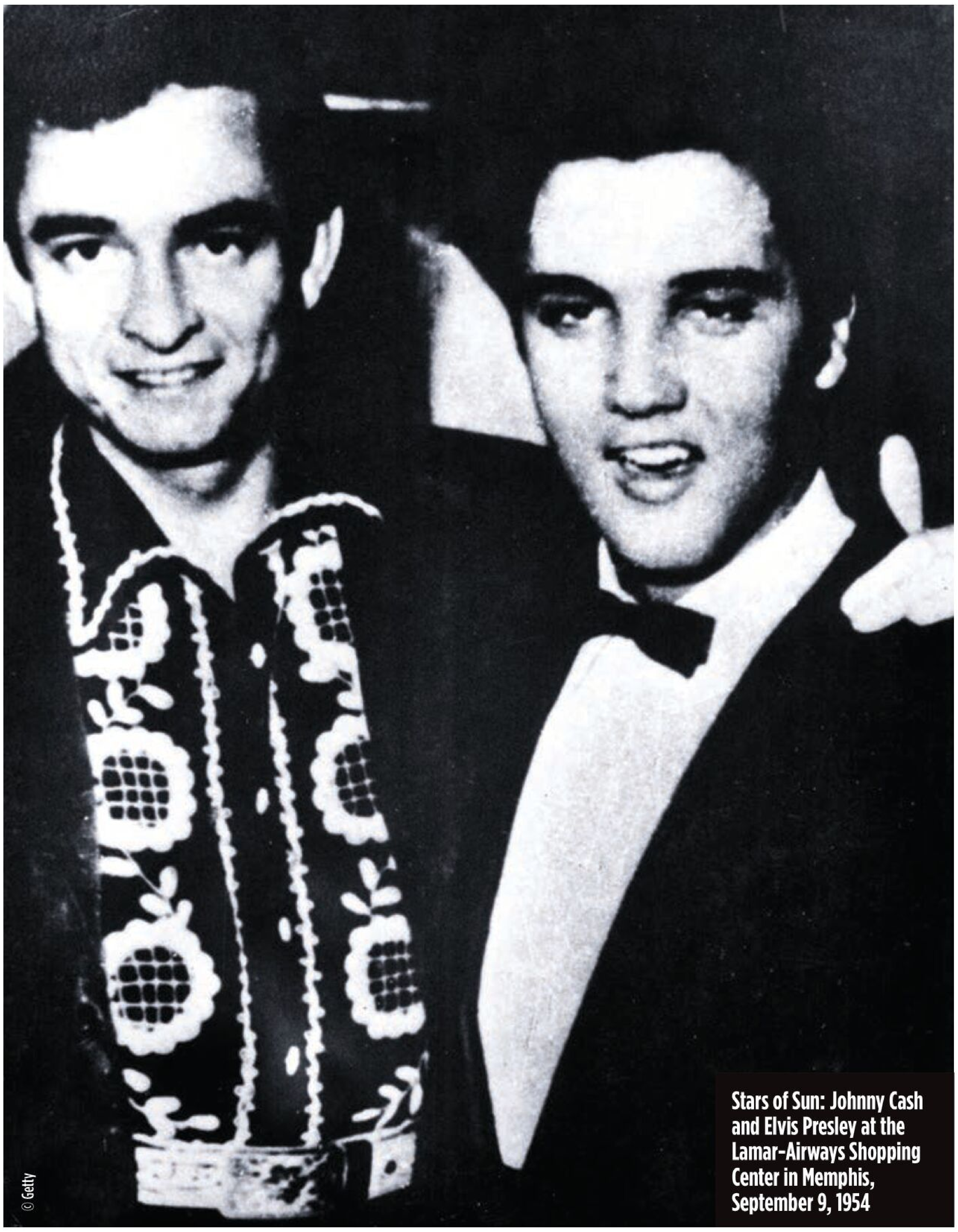
Cash was hoping to record his beloved gospel music for Sun, going so far as to camp out on Sun's doorstep at 706 Union Avenue so Phillips couldn't avoid giving him an audition. Sam quickly put at an end to that hope by claiming that he couldn't sell spirituals. Phillips wanted to hear any secular originals Cash might have had squirrelled away instead. His locomotive-driven train song *Hey, Porter!* fit the bill, so he cut it in March of 1955.

Luther's rudimentary riffs certainly complemented Cash's craggy baritone

Phillips told his new musical find to go home and write another number of equal quality for the other side of what would be his Sun debut, so Cash came back with a similarly rollicking *Cry! Cry! Cry!* They laid it on tape that May. It became the A-side of his single, Cash's quavering baritone thundering over the rudimentary "boom-chicka-boom" rhythmic thrust produced by Luther's bottom-end fretwork, Cash's acoustic strumming, and Grant's percussive bass. *Cry! Cry! Cry!* proved a national hit at the year's end, and Johnny was on his way.

ON THE LINE

The song Cash cut as an encore for Sun would endure for the rest of his life as one of his signature themes. Recorded in July of '55, *Folsom Prison Blues* served to permanently establish the snarling outsider image that Cash tried hard to uphold during the 60s and beyond (though contrary to popular



© Getty

Stars of Sun: Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley at the Lamar-Airways Shopping Center in Memphis, September 9, 1954

belief, he never served more than a night in jail here and there after a drunken spree). In fact, Johnny cadged a good portion of the song from an obscure 1953 recording by pop bandleader Gordon Jenkins called *Crescent City Blues*, though the memorable line about shooting a man in Reno “just to watch him die” was all his own. *Folsom Prison Blues* and its similarly potent flip, the plaintive original *So Doggone Lonesome*, were both major country hits in early 1956.

The highly unusual modulating structure of Cash’s next Sun smash, waxed in April of 1956, was inspired by a technical malfunction during his Air Force days in Germany. Someone in his barracks was fooling around with Johnny’s reel-to-reel tape recorder and apparently threaded a tape on backwards. The mysterious alien drone emanating from the machine mesmerised Cash and somehow factored into his composing *I Walk The Line*, the singer zeroing in on each key change with a haunting hum. Johnny put the song together while on the road in Texas; it was destined to be titled *Because You’re Mine* until touring partner Carl Perkins suggested *I Walk The Line* might be more memorable. To simulate the sound of a drummer’s brushes, Cash wound a strip of paper through the

SUN
RECORD COMPANY
Hi Lo Music BMI
Vocal U-173
FOLSOM PRISON BLUES
(Cash)
JOHNNY CASH
and the TENNESSEE TWO
232
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

JACK CLEMENT

Johnny Cash’s pop career began with a young man who created the other half of the classic Sun sound

Although he was almost as much a maverick in the studio as Sam Phillips in his own way, Jack Clement’s production instincts were diametrically opposed to those of his boss. Sam liked it rough and raw, perfectly willing to overlook imperfection in service of feel; Clement aimed to make records that were more inherently musical. He surrounded Cash with a layer of extra instrumentation that expanded his pop appeal but obscured his singular sound.

Born in Memphis, Clement was serving in the Marines outside Washington, D.C. in 1948 when he heard bluegrass and took up the banjo. His musical cohorts there included a young Roy Clark and fiddle ace Scotty Stoneman. After four years in the service, Cowboy Jack formed a duet with mandolinist Buzz Busby, the pair cutting a 1953 single for the Sheraton label in Boston.

Returning to Memphis, Jack hooked up with country bandleader Slim Wallace, the two launching their own Fernwood label. Their first artist was Billy Lee Riley, but when Clement brought his rockabilly single *Trouble Bound* to Sun for mastering after cutting it at Fernwood’s garage studio, an impressed Phillips hired Jack in June of 1956 as an A&R man and picked up Billy’s single, too.

Clement made himself useful at Sun as a producer, songwriter, and recording engineer. He auditioned Jerry Lee Lewis when the audacious piano pounder dropped in at 706 Union, and worked on Roy Orbison’s *Rockhouse*. Clement teamed with arranger Bill Justis at the label (the two were responsible for Orbison’s last Sun single), but his transformation of Cash was his most notable accomplishment there.

Clement made two 1958 Sun singles of his own, *Ten Years* and *The Black Haired Man*, taking a folkish route yet incorporating much the same sound he imparted on Johnny’s later Sun output (the latter song was a gunfighter ballad).

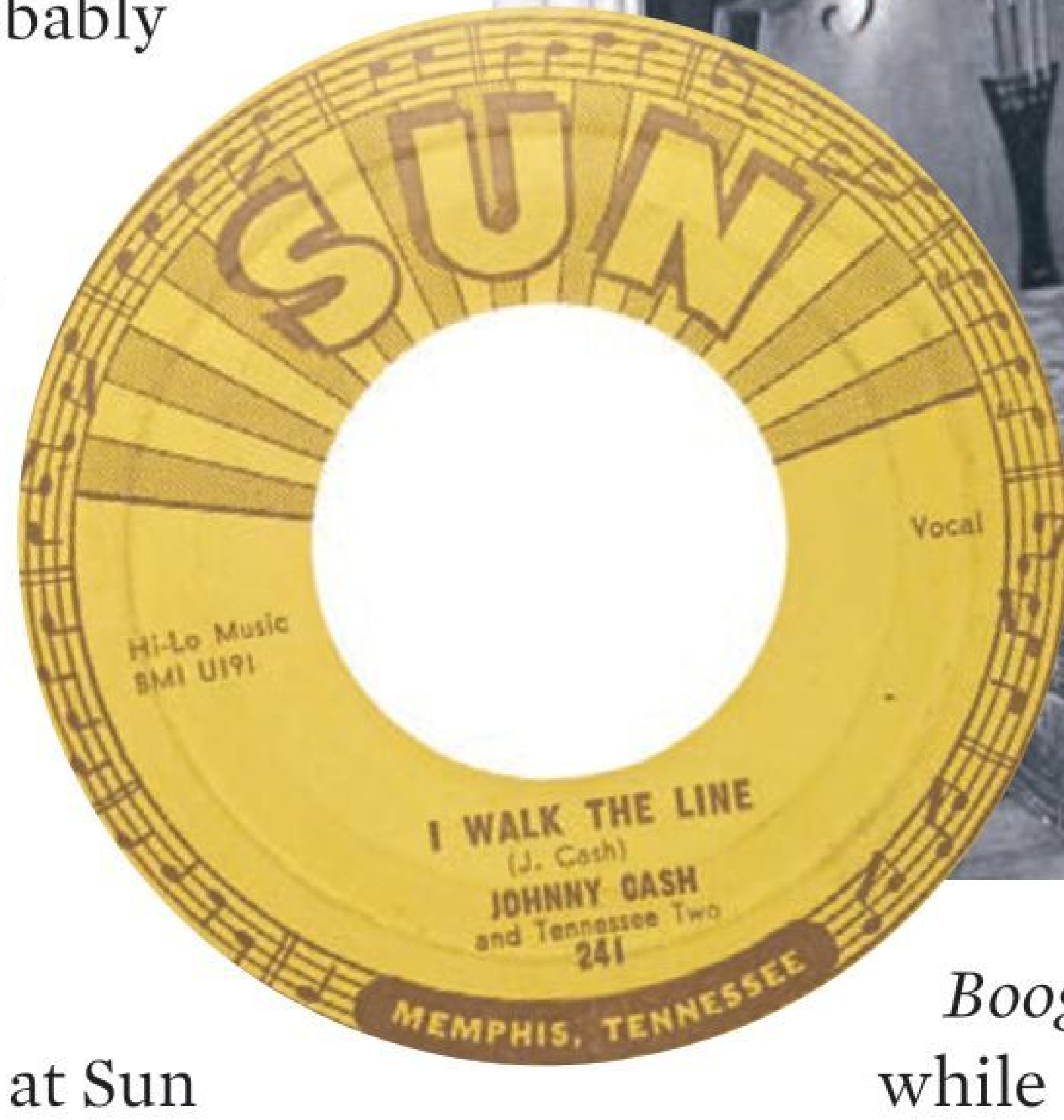
During the early 60s, Clement journeyed to Beaumont, Texas to work with fellow producer Bill Hall on sides by Dickey Lee and blues guitarist Albert Collins. He settled in Nashville in 1965 and established himself as one of Music Row’s true characters, discovering Charley Pride along the way.

© Getty

Marshall Grant, Johnny Cash and Luther Perkins at an event at Belle Meade Country Club in Nashville, TN

strings of his acoustic guitar, muting their ring.

An ode of eternal devotion, *I Walk The Line* would endure as Johnny's best-loved song, blasting off for the top of the C&W charts that summer (between Cash and Carl, whose *Blue Suede Shoes* had been a blockbuster earlier in the year, Sam Phillips wasn't missing the recently departed Elvis very much at all). More than a few adventurous teenagers probably bought the single at least partially for its relentless B-side hit *Get Rhythm*, the rocking tale of a shoeshine boy whose popping rag was guaranteed to cure even the nastiest case of the blues. Waxed the same day as its plattermate, *Get Rhythm* was as close to rockabilly as Johnny came at Sun (Luther's picking was uncharacteristically aggressive), although he wrote *Rock 'N' Roll Ruby* for Warren Smith and gave *You're My Baby* (originally under the somewhat less appealing title of *Little Woolly Booger*) to Roy Orbison while he was there.



The Louisiana Hayride welcomed Johnny and his Tennessee Two to its stage early in his Sun tenure, and they made their Grand Ole Opry debut in 1956. Johnny and Carl had become pals as they toured across the South on packages with their labelmates and others, and an impromptu stop at 706 Union Avenue that December at the Perkins session that produced his song *Matchbox* brought all four of Phillips' greatest discoveries into Sun's studio at the same time for an epochal summit meeting… even if it was viewed as little more than an impromptu gathering at the time.

"Sam hired Jerry Lee Lewis to play piano with us," said W.S. 'Fluke' Holland, at the time Carl Perkins' drummer (he would make the shift to playing with Cash in 1960). "John and Elvis heard we were in town because they both lived in Memphis there. They just dropped by to say hello, and of course when they dropped by, the session just kind of stopped. Elvis sat down at the piano, and they just started singing some songs and it turned into a jam session. Nobody thought anything about it that night.

"Jack Clement, who was running the recorder, he didn't think anything about it when the jam session started. But he did turn the machine on and let it run, and he went next door to the Taylor Café to get him a sandwich."

It would be several decades before that elusive tape finally surfaced, with the mythical four-piece now credited as the Million Dollar Quartet.

Cash's next pair of two-sided hits, *There You Go* (a country chart-topper in March of '57) b/w *Train Of Love* ➡

CHARLIE RICH

Sun attracted more than its share of fantastic rockabilly pianists, and one would pen tunes for Johnny Cash

Sun was a real ivory-tinklers' label. Smokey Joe Baugh, Jimmy Wilson, Carl McVoy, Carl Mann, and several more all rattled the keyboards with gusto, though none of these rivalled Jerry Lee's supremacy. The only one that could was Charlie Rich. Far more schooled in sophisticated jazz stylings than any of the others, Rich had to squelch his well-schooled tendencies at the rough and rockin' Sun. He was Phillips' last significant discovery.

Born in Forrest City, Arkansas, the handsome but shy pianist dug Stan Kenton and Mel Tormé rather than anyone named Hank. "He wasn't the flamboyant entertainer," said Van Eaton. "Charlie would sit there at the piano. He was much more comfortable in a blues honky-tonk jazz bar type of setting than he was out on a stage." The late Sun house guitarist Roland Janes agreed: "He was playing for the audience, and playing for himself at the same time. He could get there in the dim lights and just really get with it, really have a good time with the music."

Charlie's wife stopped by Sun on his behalf. Bill Justis listened to his demo tape and handed Mrs Rich some Jerry Lee platters, telling her to have Charlie audition when he could play "that bad". When Rich did catch on at Sun, it was as a writer. "They had him write some songs for Jerry Lee Lewis," said Van Eaton. "He played piano real well, and to pick up a little side money, he worked sessions as a sideman." Rich penned *The Ways Of A Woman In Love* and *Thanks A Lot* for Cash, both hits.

Rich could rock, too – as he proved on *Whirlwind*, his 1958 debut single for Sun's Phillips International logo. He struck paydirt his third time out with the muscular *Lonely Weekends*, powered by Van Eaton's gospel-tinged bass drum pattern. "We cut that session at the old Sun studio, and then it was overdubbed and finished at the new studio when it opened," recalled Janes, referring to Phillips' spacious nearby second facility at 630 Madison Avenue. Rich was briefly a rock and roll star when *Lonely Weekends* hit in 1960. He would eventually achieve country superstardom during the 70s, but Charlie would have probably preferred crooning jazz standards in an intimate piano bar to the spoils of fame.

Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two, backstage at the Grand Ole Opry

© Getty

and *Next In Line* b/w *Don't Make Me Go*, all four tunes written by Johnny, remained in the same stripped-down mode, with only Luther and Marshall backing him. "When he heard something that he never heard and he knew that nobody had ever sounded that way before, whether it be a player or the singer, or like Luther Perkins with John Cash, Sam knew that was different," said Holland. "So that's where Sam Phillips was, in my mind, a genius. Just letting the people do what they could do was what he did."

NEW SOUND, NEW STYLE

When Jack Clement assumed the production reins at a July 1957 session, Cash's sound changed markedly. Clement augmented Johnny's sound with pianist Jimmy Wilson and drummer J.M. Van Eaton on *Home Of The Blues*, its title borrowed from a record store on Beale Street that Cash regularly patronised. It was a hit, as was its dramatic flip side *Give My Love To Rose*, Johnny's first foray into songs about the Old West.

Having expanded Cash's musical palette just a little, Clement went all the way and then some at a November '57 session for a song that he'd written. Johnny invested the saccharine narrative of *Ballad Of A Teenage Queen* with a measure of unshakable commitment that would have sounded ludicrous coming from anyone else, Cowboy Jack decorating his creation with a schmaltzy choir topped off by soprano Cyd Mosteller.

Yet *Teenage Queen* reigned supreme for 10 weeks on Billboard's country hit parade and made major pop inroads as well (Cash even lip-synched it on *American Bandstand*). Johnny wrote the atmospheric B-side *Big River* in the back seat of a car in White Plains, New York. His gift for witty wordplay was never more acute than it was here, Clement's own open-tuned acoustic guitar adding rhythmic muscle underneath (*Big River* was also a huge country hit).

Clement opted to use a male vocal chorus and Wilson's honky-tonk 88s when he gave Johnny his *Guess Things Happen That Way* in April of '58. Its hard-bitten narrative was a much better fit for Cash than its predecessor, and Johnny had himself another No.1

18+

WHAT IS
AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME -

the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages
Brand new content
One site

AVXLIVE.ICU

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu

SUN
U-222
Vocal
Knox Music, Inc. BMI
TRAIN OF LOVE
(J. Cash)
JOHNNY CASH
and
TENNESSEE TWO
258
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

country and western seller that summer.

"I don't think Johnny really wanted a drummer, because he had been quite successful without one. But they were starting to do more things, bigger arrangements," said Van Eaton, also on the date. "They were kind of throwing all this at Johnny at one time, with the drums and the piano and vocal groups singing, 'Dream on, dream on, teenage queen'. He was more or less used to just him and the other two guys. So it was kind of work in it for all of us. But it went well, really, once he realised that the sound was going to still be good. He was okay with it." Johnny's own inviting *Come In Stranger* rode the opposite side.

Cash still had a keen hankering to make a gospel album, and Phillips made it clear that wasn't going to happen at Sun. Johnny made a commitment with Columbia A&R man Don Law to jump ship when his contract ran out on 1 August 1958, even if he initially denied his intentions to Sam. Carl, whose career had cooled off considerably since he was red-hot with *Blue Suede Shoes*, had made the same commitment. "We were all going for bigger money, bigger deals," said the late Perkins. "For me, it was a mistake that I left. For Johnny Cash, no."

SUN
Knox Music, Inc. BMI
U-284
Vocal
2:07
BALLAD OF A TEENAGE QUEEN
(J. Clement)
JOHNNY CASH
And The Tennessee Two
283
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

When Phillips ascertained that his top country star would soon be defecting to record for a major label, he was incensed, demanding that Cash record a mammoth final batch of sides to complete his contract with Sun. Naturally, Johnny was reticent to leave any fresh originals behind at a label that he would soon depart, so his last two studio sessions for Sun that May and July were dominated by material supplied by his labelmates – chief among them Phillips' latest major find, jazz-savvy pianist Charlie Rich.

"It seemed like we did about 20 songs that he had to cut for Sam," said Van Eaton. "We just started trying to get some tunes so he could get his contract finished up." Rich teamed with house arranger Bill Justis to provide Johnny's late summer hit *The Ways Of A Woman In Love*, another beautifully crafted theme from a lyrical standpoint. The poetic *You're The Nearest Thing To Heaven* had its roots in the country single *It's A Little More Like Heaven* by Hoyt Johnson on the Memphis-based Erwin logo from the previous year. Johnson wrote it with Chet Atkins' half-brother Jimmy; when Cash recut it in modified form, his name was added to the credits (in between, Hank Locklin had done the tune under its original title for RCA Victor).

SUN
U-283
Vocal
2:29
Hi Lo Music, Inc. BMI
BIG RIVER
(Cash)
JOHNNY CASH
And The Tennessee Two
283
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

CLASH OF THE CASH

Phillips' healthy stockpile of Cash masters from those final sessions hit the streets just like clockwork in head-to-head competition with Johnny's fresh Columbia platters, several of them doing reasonably well. Clement's *It's Just About Time* charted in early 1959 for Johnny, and another Rich-penned gem, the self-pitying *Thanks A Lot*, just missed the C&W Top 10 a couple of months later. Cash and Clement collaborated on *Katy Too*, a hit that summer. Orbison's *You Tell Me* was pressed up in the autumn as Cash's next Sun 45, but the hit honours went to Johnny's touching rendition of Gene Autry's *Goodbye Little Darlin' Goodbye* on the other side, which harked back to late 1956. Cash fans even went for the rock-and-rollish *Straight A's In Love* and a tough *Mean*

➡

> **"They were starting to do more things, bigger arrangements. It went well once he realised the sound was still going to be good"**

Johnny with his wife Vivian Liberto plus Rosanne and Kathy, the first and second of their eventual four daughters

© Getty

LUTHER PERKINS

The expressionless guitarist with the bare-bones sound: was there ever a more perfect musical match?

It's impossible to imagine the singular sound of Johnny Cash without the deliciously uncomplicated lead guitar of Luther Perkins at its heart. Self-taught on his instrument, he was admittedly no virtuoso. But Luther gave Johnny exactly what he needed: a steady rhythmic thrust on his low strings that was just as instantly identifiable as Cash's deep-toned pipes. Perkins wasn't just invaluable musically; his perpetually deadpan look onstage gave his bandleader a welcome comic foil.

Born in Como, Mississippi, Luther was already in his mid-twenties when he began jamming with bassist Marshall Grant and steel guitarist Red Kernodle during slow moments at Automobile Sales Company in Memphis. Cash soon joined in the fun and ended up bringing them all along to his first Sun audition. Red was so nervous that he split midway through, but Luther would contribute countless stinging solos to Cash's output on his twangy Fender guitars in years to come, notably on *Get Rhythm* and *Luther Played The Boogie*. He wasn't fancy, just extremely effective.

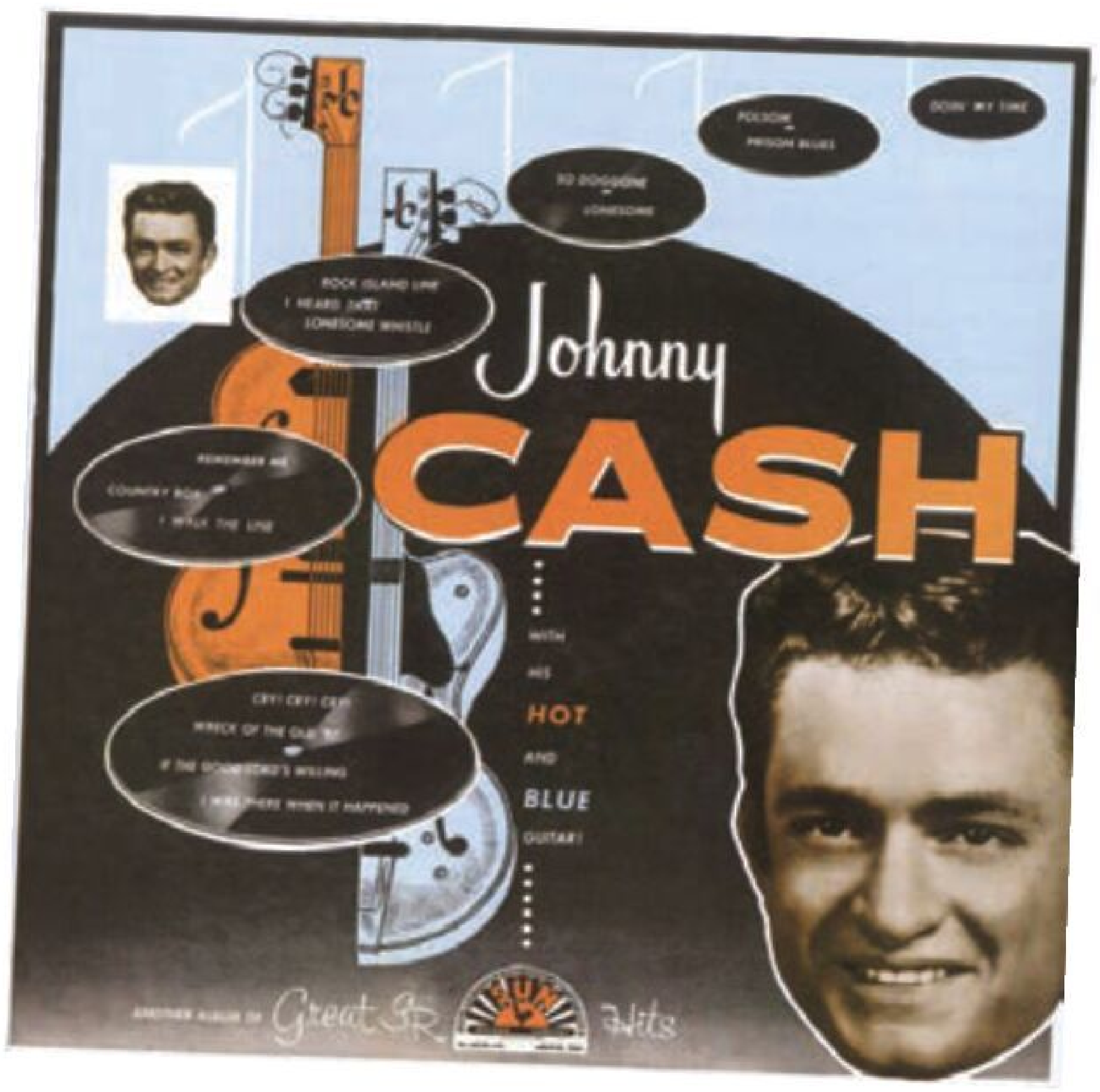
Sadly, Luther lost his life on 5 August 1968. He'd fallen asleep while smoking two days prior at his Hendersonville, Tennessee home, and the effects of the resulting blaze ultimately killed him. His guitar patterns have been copied by countless pickers… but never bettered.

Eyed Cat in 1960, despite both masters being several years old.

Law had his new signing hard at work in Columbia's Nashville studios even before July of 1958 had come to a close, Luther and Marshall still dominating his backing cast. They were joined by Marvin Hughes on piano and the Jordanaires, Nashville's leading male vocal group when it came to recording sessions. At Columbia, Cash continued his unusual practice of scoring two-sided C&W hits; both *All Over Again* and *What Do I Care* scaled the charts as his first Columbia offering, each an original. But while his flinty self-penned gunfighter lament *Don't Take Your Guns To Town* paced the C&W hit parade in early '59, its uncharacteristically tender flipside *I Still Miss Someone*, its authorship credited to Johnny and his brother Roy, somehow missed deejays' attention altogether.

Sam Phillips' stockpile of Cash masters hit the streets in competition with Johnny's fresh Columbia platters

This 1958 Sun EP encapsulated four tracks from the *Sings The Songs*... album, two of which – *The Ways Of A Woman In Love* and *Guess Things Happen That Way* – were hits

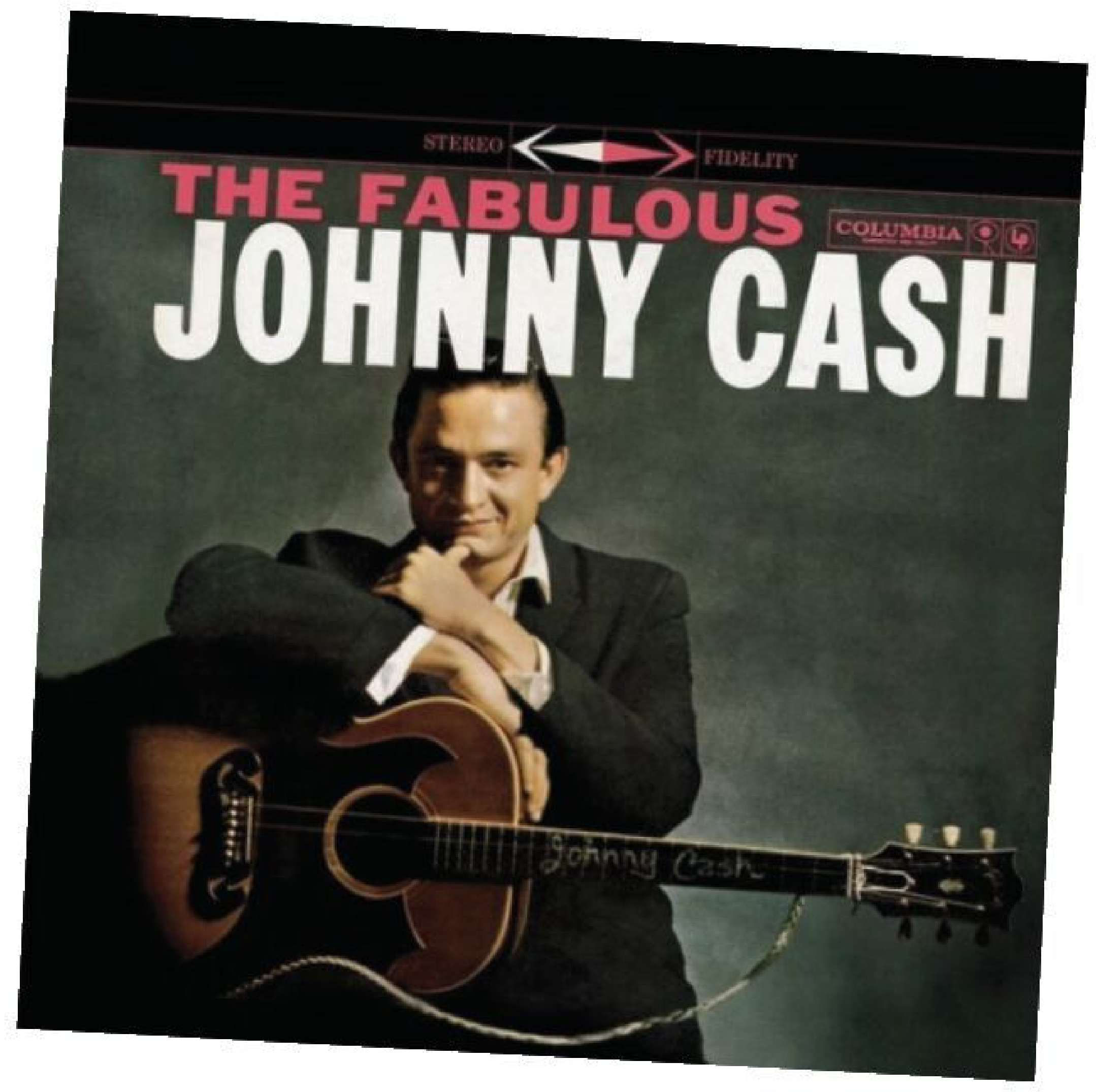


The long-playing 1957 debut *Johnny Cash With His Hot And Blue Guitar* was a major milestone in the stories of both Johnny and Sun Records.

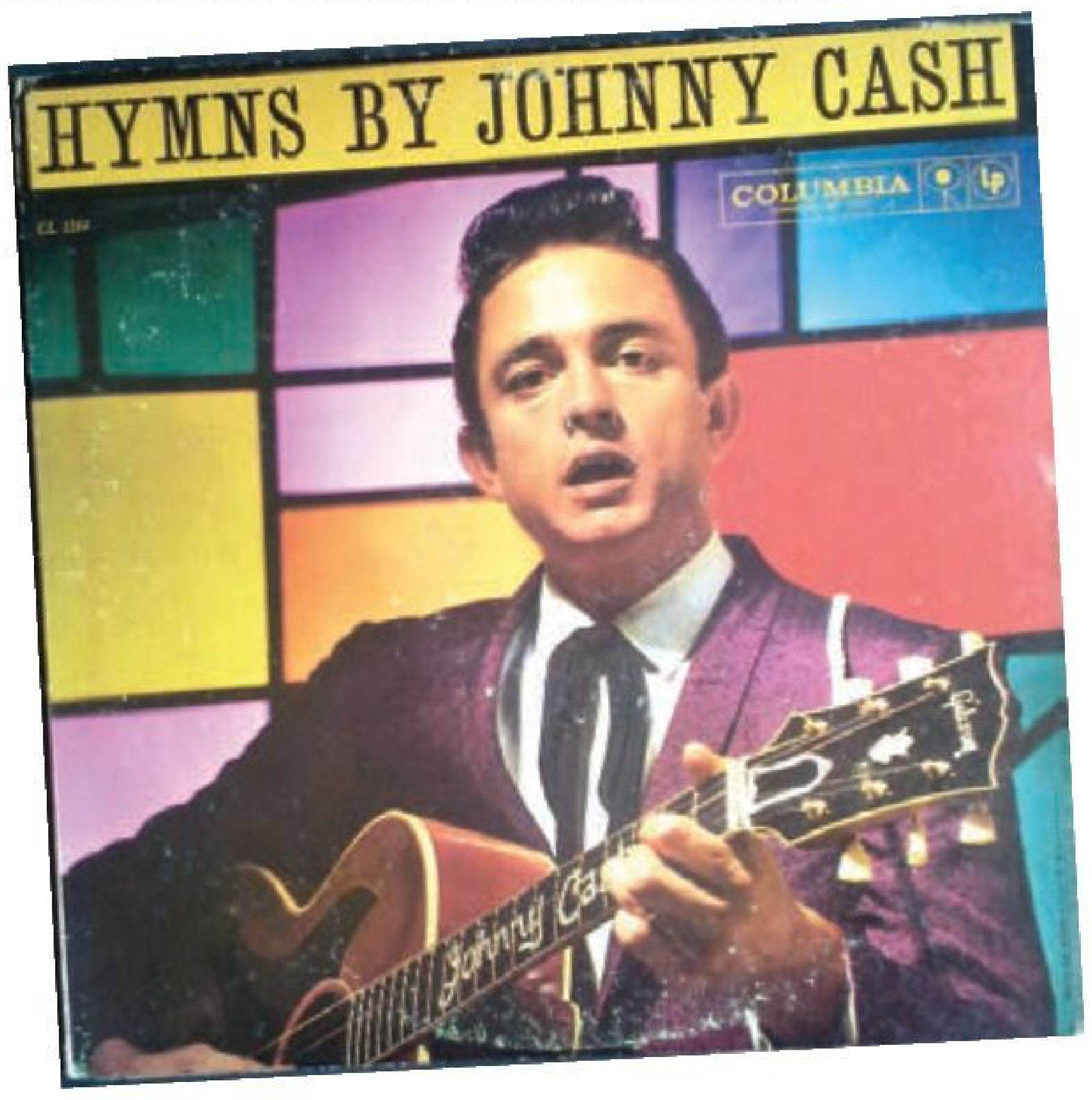
The lively murder ballad *Frankie And Johnny* had been around since the turn of the century, recorded in various forms by everyone from pre-war bluesman Mississippi John Hurt to a rip-snorting Sun treatment by Jerry Lee Lewis. Cash took it a wee bit further, dreaming up a wry answer song he called *Frankie's Man, Johnny* that cracked the C&W Top 10 during the spring of 1959 on Columbia with another hit original, *You Dreamer You*, adorning the back.

Before the year was over, Cash scored once again for his new imprint with yet another two-sided smash. *I Got Stripes*, his first prison song to crash the upper reaches of the country hit parade, was twinned with *Five Feet High And Rising*, a fascinating true-life account of a harrowing flood that engulfed the Cash family's farm when Johnny was just a wee lad. Johnny had a rare gift for making even a tragedy song sound catchy.

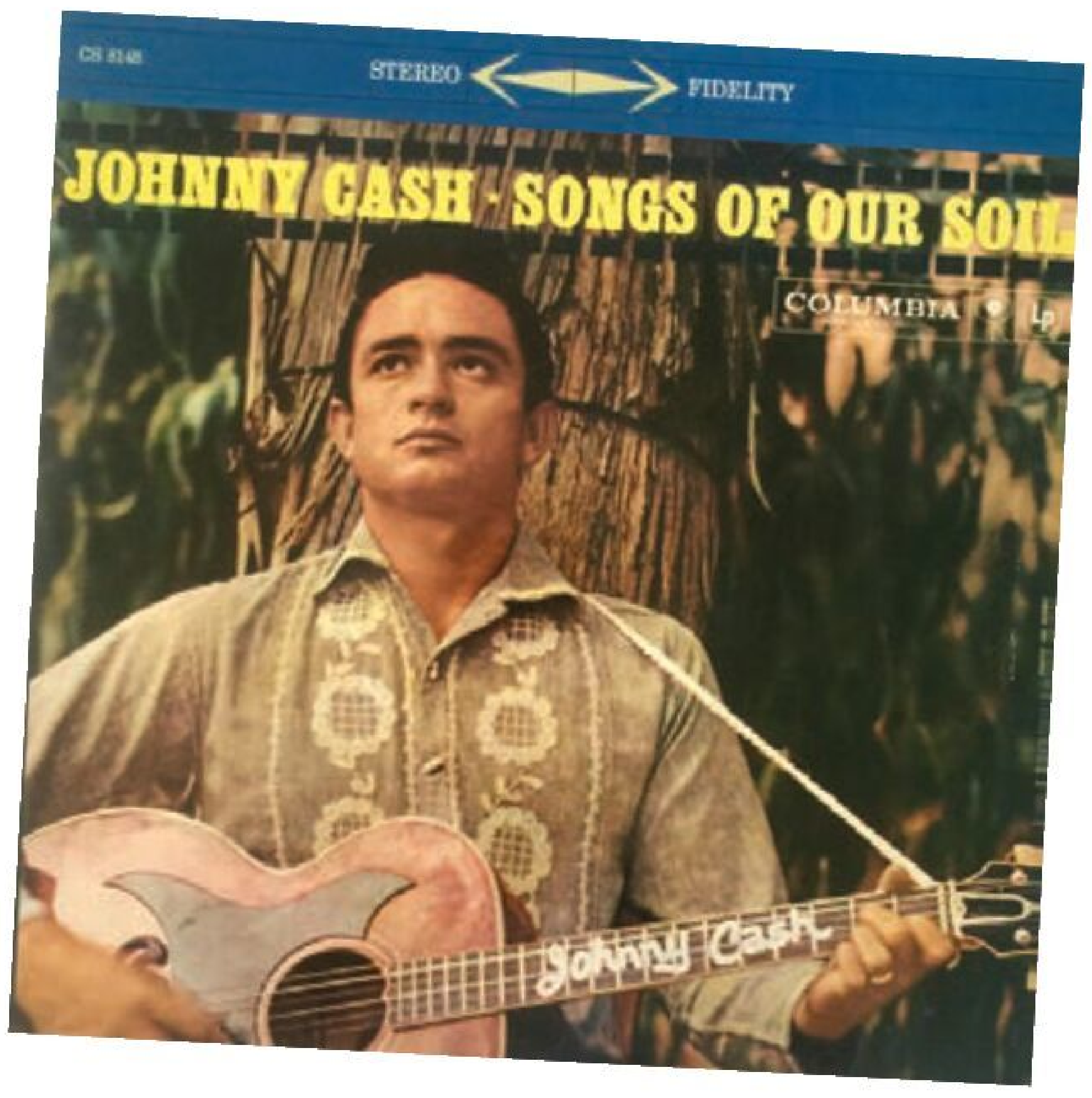
Under Law's direction, Columbia allowed Cash to make the concept albums that he long yearned to do at Sun. Although his first LP for the company was a standard collection of recent singles (*The Fabulous Johnny Cash*), his next one was the gospel set he'd dreamed of, *Hymns By Johnny Cash*. *Songs Of Our Soil* came next.



Cash's first album for Columbia was a 29-minute, 12-track masterpiece with added vocal backing by the Jordanaires. On first release it sold over half a million copies



Released simultaneously in 1959 with *The Fabulous Johnny Cash* was the singer's first collection of spirituals – the very reason he had parted ways with Sam Phillips and Sun



Songs Of Our Soil was the sixth Cash album and the last of the 1950s. With The Jordanaires again plus Marvin Hughes on piano, it was a morbid but compelling collection

At the dawn of the new decade, Luther and Marshall welcomed a third member into their fraternity: drummer 'Fluke' Holland, who split with Carl Perkins and had been working with one of Phillips' new talents, rockabilly pianist Carl Mann. "I was going to retire in 1960," he recalled. "I had me a job lined up with a company here in Jackson, Tennessee, and I got a call from John Cash. He wanted me to go with him for two weeks – a big engagement up in New York for a week, and then down to Atlantic City at the Steel Pier for a week. I called the people I was going to work with, told 'em I'd like to be a couple weeks late. And they said that'd be fine. So I went on that trip, and we had so much fun that I just decided that I would stay in the music business." He stuck around for the next 37 years.

The 60s would find Cash at both his best and worst. Personal problems, especially a ballooning addiction to pills, nearly overcame him. But the Man in Black triumphed, amassing an incredible body of work on his way to becoming a full-fledged national icon. If there was a Mount Rushmore of country music stars, the craggy visage of J.R. Cash would be carved on there, situated front and centre. ✶

Cash in 1959: by this time the rigours of the performing lifestyle were beginning to affect him badly

© Alamy

CLASSIC ALBUM

HIGH FIDELITY Specialty SP 2100
HERE'S
LITTLE
RICHARD

HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD

WORDS BY **JACK WATKINS**

Capturing lightning in a bottle seemed no easy task until Little Richard unleashed a live favourite that he never thought he would ever commit to tape...

Another glammed-up studio shot for Specialty, this one taken in Hollywood in 1956

© Getty

Richard Wayne Penniman, aka Little Richard, was the man who put the camp into rock'n'roll. Promoters announced him as "the Georgia Peach", and he declared himself "the Bronze Liberace". While his raucous singing could rival that of any self-respecting blues shouter, he offset the machismo with effeminate squeals and pleading high notes. Physically, he cut an outrageous figure. He sported a six-inch pompadour from which tresses would break loose as he bobbed and jerked his head around to the music. He exaggerated his already exotic looks by wearing mascara which emphasised his flashing eyes and wide smile. Jerry Lee Lewis recalled that once, when sharing the bill with his fellow manic exponent of boogie-woogie piano, he had to wipe nail-polish off the keys.

If parents of the mid-50s were horrified by Little Richard's gender-bending persona, kids just laughed and lapped it up, rejoicing in the antics of a generous, fun-loving free spirit. Arguably, he did more to break down racial barriers for a certain generation than any amount of civil rights protests in the years that followed.

The fact that no-one encapsulated the visual thrill of early rock quite like the man from Macon, Georgia, has tended to obscure the quality of his recorded material, and that's a mistake. For all his brash, boisterous on-stage energy, Little Richard's debut album from 1957, *Here's Little Richard*, is a period piece that plays like a house-wrecker even today.

The record deserves re-evaluation, as there's a sense that Little Richard has never quite received his critical dues. True, his time at the top as a creative hit-maker was sadly brief, spanning two years between 1956 and 1958, by which time he'd "found God" and become a preacher. It's also true that his music lacked diversity: he had little of Chuck Berry's lyrical wit, and wasn't quite in Jerry Lee's league as a piano player. Neither did he share Buddy Holly's fascination with experimenting with sound and musical forms. But if you want the supreme example of take-no-prisoners rock, with no filler, no slowing down for an intake of breath, just drop *Here's Little Richard* onto the turntable and listen to the boy go. The LP, released in March 1957 by the small independent label Specialty, is by far Little Richard's biggest-selling album, reaching No.13 on the Billboard chart that ➡

Little Richard's debut album is a period piece that plays like a house-wrecker, even today

spring. While it doesn't include subsequent hit singles like *Lucille* or *Good Golly, Miss Molly*, it's an unfettered expression of Little Richard's mad genius, backed by choice New Orleans sidemen, recorded at a time when rock'n'roll was at its absolute creative and commercial height.

It kicks off with *Tutti Frutti*, Little Richard's breakthrough single and a key song in any account of the genesis of popular music. It's sometimes been written as if Little Richard chanced upon the rapturous, exclamatory opening – "Wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-wop-bam-bam!" – in a revelatory moment in the recording booth during his first session for Specialty, at the J&M Studios, run by Cosimo Matassa, in 1955. In fact, a racier version of the song had been part of his live repertoire for some time, but he'd never thought that it would make a hit. "I'd been singing *Tutti Frutti* for years, but it never struck me as a song you'd record," he told biographer Charles White. He'd just used it as a throwaway to loosen up audiences, who roared at the ribald lyrics. But when it came to making records, as he explained to White, "I didn't go to New Orleans to record no *Tutti Frutti*."

READY TO ROCK'N'ROLL

When he arrived at Art Rupe's Specialty, he was already hardened by several years on the road. Probably, he was intent on graduating to serious R&B, in the manner of one of his favourites, Fats Domino. Yet Little Richard had been markedly different even while building up a following in Georgia and Mississippi in the early 1950s. Bandleader Johnny Otis recalled catching his act in Houston, walking in to see "this outrageous person, good-looking and very effeminate, with a big pompadour. He started singing and he was so good… he reminded me of Dinah Washington… when he got through he remarked: 'This is Little Richard, King of the Blues,' and then he added, 'and the Queen, too.'"

Little of this had transmitted itself on Little Richard's early recordings. Sides cut for RCA in 1951/'52 and Don Robey's Peacock label in 1953, where he worked with Otis, only hinted at the hard-driving R&B he would come to perfect. At Specialty, Art Rupe had been looking for someone who'd provide a "big band sound expressed in a churchy way". Rupe and producer Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell thought they'd found it when they listened to a tape that Richard had sent them. But at that first session at the J&M Studios, Blackwell recalled, the future star may have turned up looking like Tarzan, but he came through the speakers sounding like Mickey Mouse.

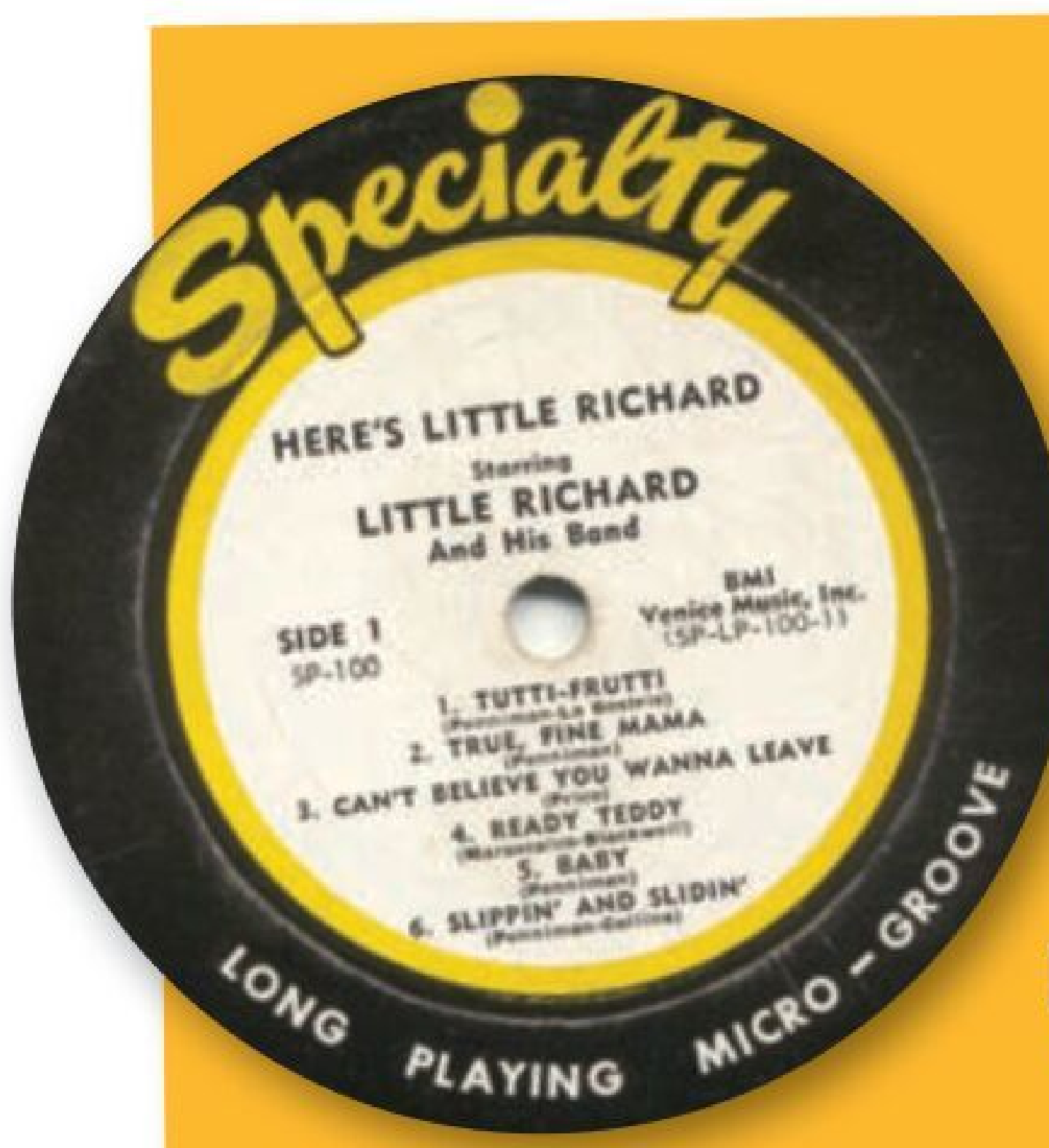
A dismayed Blackwell decided to call a break, and took his nervous new recruit and the rest of the recording crew off to lunch. Little Richard started fooling around on an old piano, "like any other ham", in Blackwell's description, and fell into a rendition of *Tutti Frutti*.

In an instant Blackwell recognised the unique bawling style he'd so liked on the demo tape. He got writer Dorothy LaBostrie, who was present, having contributed one of the songs to the hitherto lacklustre session, to clean up the words. Richard was allowed to accompany himself on the piano, and with one mic placed next to him and another inside the piano, it took just 15 minutes and three takes to record. By the time it appeared on *Here's Little Richard*, it had already given him a first hit single, reaching No.17 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in January 1957.

The lyrics of another killer track, *Long Tall Sally*, came courtesy of a little girl named Enotris Johnson, who'd walked a vast distance across the state of Mississippi to the J&M Studios to present the song so she could earn money to support her sick aunt in hospital. Lacking a melody, Little Richard and Blackwell were at first unenthusiastic, but they loved lines like Uncle John and Long Tall Sally having to "duck back in the alley". Little Richard's fraught delivery was deliberately speeded up with the intention of frustrating Pat Boone, whose tamer version of *Tutti Frutti* had outsold the original. It didn't succeed, but at least this time Boone's cover didn't outsell Little Richard's version, which was also notable for being the first time he recorded one of his trademarks, the exultant, extended scream "Oooooh!!"

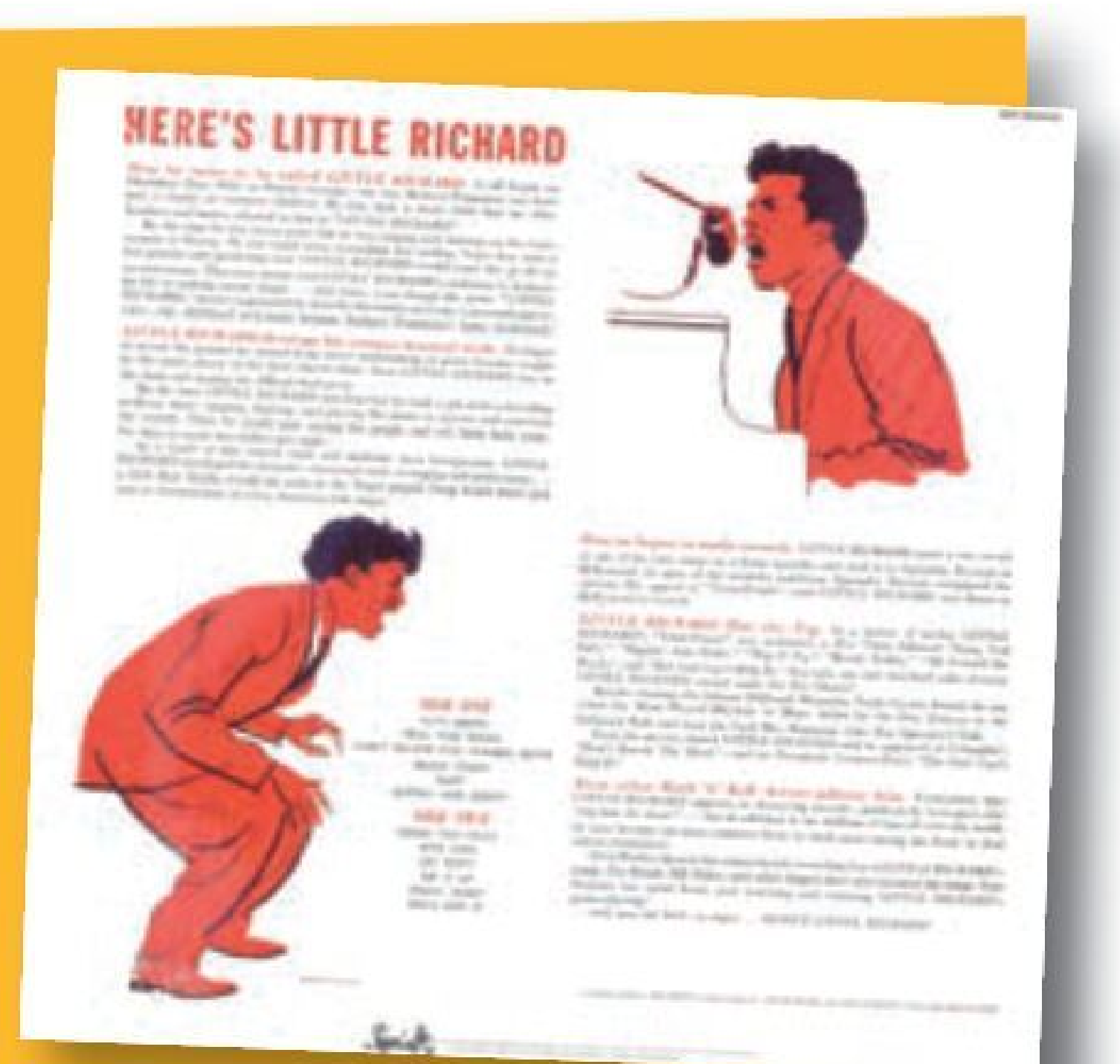
It's been said that Little Richard's records had little time for the usual boy-meets-girl-sentiments common in that period. In fact, at least one track, *Rip It Up* – "Saturday

➡



LISTEN UP!

HERE'S LITTLE RICHARD (SPECIALTY, 1957)



SIDE A

Tutti Frutti (Dorothy La Bostrie, Richard Penniman, Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell) 2:26
True, Fine Mama (Richard Penniman) 2:43
Can't Believe You Wanna Leave (Leo Price) 2:28
Ready Teddy (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, John Marascalco) 2:09
Baby (Richard Penniman) 2:06
Slippin' and Slidin' (Peepin' and Hidin') (Eddie Bocage, Albert Collins, Richard Penniman, James Smith) 2:44

SIDE B

Long Tall Sally (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:11
Miss Ann (Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:17
Oh, Why? (William Scott) 2:10
Rip It Up (Robert 'Bumps' Blackwell, John Marascalco) 2:24
Jenny, Jenny (Enotris Johnson, Richard Penniman) 2:05
She's Got It (John Marascalco, Richard Penniman) 2:27

LITTLE RICHARD Vocals, Piano • **HUEY SMITH** Piano • **ALVIN 'RED' TYLER** Baritone Sax • **EARL PALMER** Drums • **LEE ALLEN** Tenor Sax • **FRANK FIELDS** Bass • **JUSTIN ADAMS** Guitar • **EDGAR BLANCHARD** Guitar • **CLIFFORD BURKS** Tenor Sax • **DANNY CARMICHAEL** Tenor Sax • **CHARLES CONNOR** Drums • **NATHANIEL DOUGLAS** Guitar • **CLARENCE FORD** Tenor and Baritone Sax • **EDWARD FRANK** Piano • **GRADY GAINES** Tenor Sax **LUCAS FATS GONDER** Piano • **JEWELL GRANT** Baritone Sax • **THOMAS HARWELL** Guitar • **LLOYD LAMBERT** Bass • **ERNEST MCCLEAN** Guitar **ROY MONTRELL** Guitar • **OSCAR MOORE** Drums • **WILLIAM H. 'FROSTY' PYLES** Guitar • **JIMMY RICE** Bass • **RENALD RICHARD** Trumpet **OLSIE ROBINSON** Guitar • **WIBERT SMITH** Guitar • **JOE TILLMAN** Tenor Sax

A *Mojo* magazine poll judged *Tutti Frutti* to be No.1 in a list of 100 Records That Changed The World

© Getty

APOLLO
LITTLE RICHARD BAND
SCHOOLBOYS CHARLIE & RAY
THE COOKIES ANRE WILLIAMS
MIDNITE SHOW TONIT

His high-strung energy wound up the tension and excitement to the max

Up in lights at the Apollo Theater, New York City – Little Richard and his band onstage circa 1957

© Getty

night and I just got paid/ Fool about my money, don't try to save" – did capture teenage feelings of living in the moment, but primarily, his song content was earthier and more in the tradition of black R&B performers whose music had been confined to what had been known as the "race chart". A lot of the singers on that chart sounded like they'd swallowed a packet of nails, and Little Richard was similarly raucous. But he spiced it up, ratcheting up the pace, energy and noise levels. This, combined with his image of – in Charles White's words – the "way-out demento", was intensely appealing.

Here's Little Richard is pretty much pedal to the metal all the way through, but some tracks are more "demento" than others. Even by his own histrionic standards, *Jenny, Jenny* is fruitcake-wild on the scale of Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Little Richard sounds so keyed up, he barely bothers finishing off a line before bouncing into the next one. *Ready Teddy* hit the ground running, and just seeming to get faster. *True Fine Mama* was the sort of R&B number The Dominoes might have recorded, but it had a great backbeat and Little Richard was in top squawking form. *Can't Believe You Wanna Leave*, written by Lloyd Price's brother Leo, was almost stately in pace in the style of Fats Domino, but Little Richard's high-strung energy wound up tension and excitement to the max.

Alongside Little Richard's frenzied vocals, a key element of the sound on these songs was the support of top Crescent City session men, especially Earl Palmer on drums, Lee Allen on tenor sax and Alvin 'Red' Tyler on baritone sax. They were veterans of sessions with the relatively sedate Fats Domino, but they were energised by Little Richard, so *Ready Teddy* and *Jenny, Jenny* featured blizzards of sax playing and an irresistible rhythm.

Little Richard reckoned Palmer and Allen were two of the greatest session musicians of all time, but he also expressed regret that Rupe and Blackwell didn't let him make the records using his own band, the Upsetters, who backed him on his live shows. "That," he reckoned, "would have been the most exciting rock'n'roll of all." The maestro of mayhem may not have been far wrong, for on one track on *Here's Little Richard* he was allowed to use those musicians, recorded in Hollywood, on *She's Got It*. With blazing sax, mad drumming and a pounding piano, it roars off like a train thundering downhill with the brakes off. It's a blistering closer to an LP chosen by *Rolling Stone* as one of the 100 Best Debut Albums Of All Time. ✶

BACKBEAT BOYS
THE DRUMMER MAN

"If a single musician can be credited with defining rock'n'roll as a rhythmic idiom distinct from the jump, R&B, and all else that preceded it," wrote the music critic Robert Palmer, "that musician is surely Earl Palmer."

You might not know it, but the killer beats and shuffles propelling countless classics of the 1950s and early 1960s like *I'm Walkin'* (Fats Domino), *Donna* (Richie Valens), *Bony Moronie* (Larry Williams), *Be-Bop Baby* (Ricky Nelson) and *The Night Has A Thousand Eyes* (Bobby Vee), as well as Little Richard's Specialty hits, was a man from New Orleans who didn't even think that much of rock'n'roll, considering himself as primarily a jazzer.

Earl Palmer's life was brilliantly recounted in Tony Scherman's biography *Backbeat* (Da Capo Press, 1999). In it, Palmer recalled: "The only reason I started what they come to call a rock'n'roll beat came from trying to match Little Richard's right hand. Ding-ding-ding-ding!" On *Tutti Frutti* though, he was still trying to work it out, and just played a shuffle, as he had done with such artists as Fats Domino or Smiley Lewis. "Listen to it now, it's easy to hear I should have been playing a rock beat," reckoned the hyper-critical backbeat pioneer.

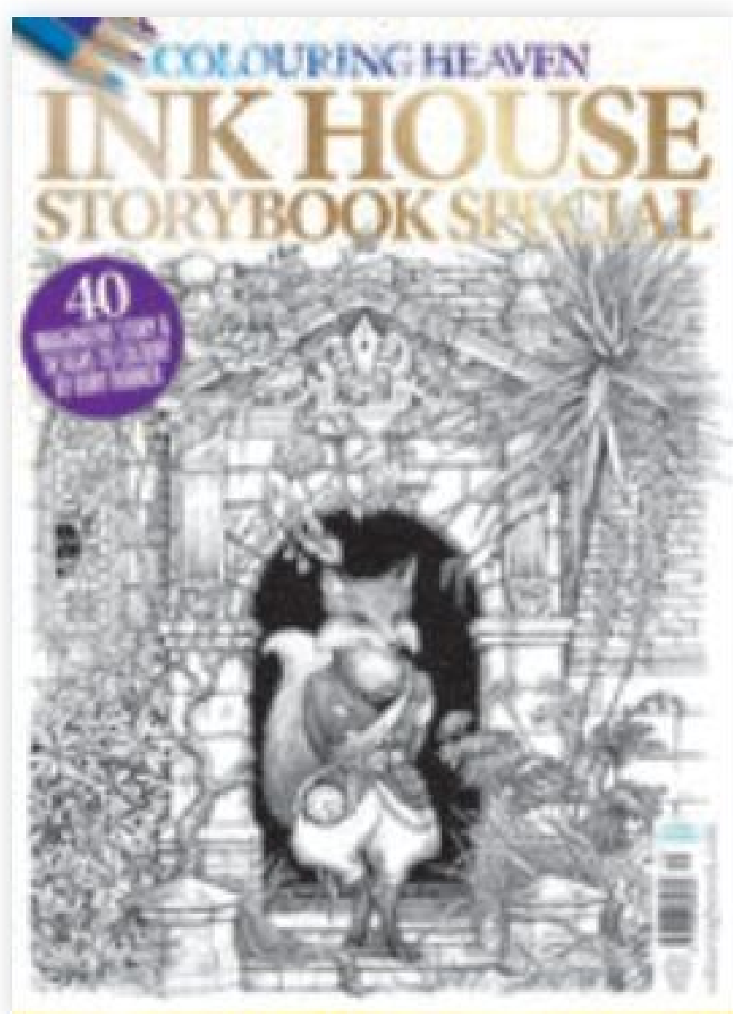
GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS FROM JUST £15.99

THE *Perfect* GIFT FOR *Christmas...*

SAVE UP TO 45% WITH A GIFT SUBSCRIPTION

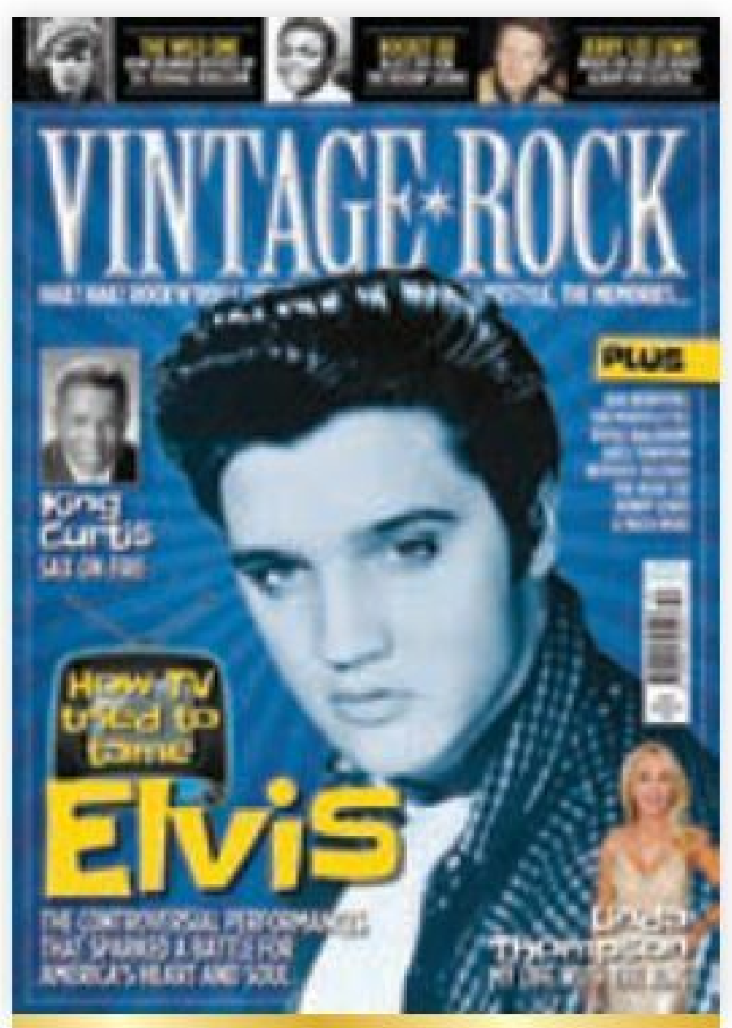
WOMEN'S RUNNING
FROM £15.99
SAVE 40%

VEGAN FOOD & LIVING
FROM £17.99
SAVE 40%


COLOURING HEAVEN
FROM £19.50
SAVE 45%

PLANET MINDFUL
FROM £19.75
SAVE 45%

ITALIA!
FROM £21.50
SAVE 40%


VINTAGE ROCK
FROM £19.75
SAVE 45%

CLASSIC POP
FROM £21.50
SAVE 40%

3 EASY WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE

SCAN THE CODE ON YOUR PHONE

anthem.co.uk/XSINGLE21
USE CODE XSINGLE21

+44 (0)1371 853 609
USE CODE XSINGLE21

Offer ends **15 January 2022**.*Savings are calculated from the UK shop/cover price. Prices listed on the covers are available to UK customers/recipients paying by Direct Debit only. We publish 13 issues of Colouring Heaven per year, 12 issues of Vegan Food & Living and Women's Running per year, and 6 issues of Vintage Rock, Classic Pop, Planet Mindful and Italia! per year. You can select your start issue.

THE FOURTH MAN

Although his only major hit was *Blue Suede Shoes*, Carl Perkins' Sun recordings are part of the foundations of rock...

WORDS BY **JACK WATKINS**

In the greatness rankings that have shaped round the four artists photographed at the piano during the fabled Sun session of December 1956, Elvis Presley is number one, with Johnny Cash second, a respectful distance behind the King. Jerry Lee Lewis is third, though his fans would argue he should be second, and the Ferriday Fireball himself would rate himself number one. No one would contest that Carl Perkins is fourth.

It wouldn't have felt that way at the time. The irony is that the historic gathering of the Million Dollar Quartet came about towards the end of a Perkins session. Although he was desperately searching at that point for a follow-up to his all-conquering *Blue Suede Shoes*, the latter was still Sun's biggest-selling single, the first to pass the one million mark only six months previously. Perkins was a fabulously talented singer, songwriter and guitarist, and for a time Sun boss Sam Phillips had nurtured hopes he could match or even exceed the impact of Elvis.

Such dreams would give way to disappointment and disenchantment, and Perkins would never enjoy the high level of success enjoyed by his counterparts. Yet far from being merely the fourth man, the recorded legacy of Perkins at Sun would become part of the bedrock of future rock'n'roll, and his name would be revered by the generation of musicians who came along after him.

Carl Perkins was a true Tennessee backwoodsman. Yet, born in 1932 into a poverty-stricken family in Tiptonville, Lake County, the banks of the Mississippi just west across the Missouri state line, his southern musical roots were impeccable.

While his sharecropper father was a devotee of country music, regularly tuning in the family's battery radio to Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, Perkins also grew up listening to the field chants of the black cotton pickers, and the sounds of gospel as sang in the white churches. His first guitar lessons came from a black sharecropping neighbour he called "Uncle John" Westbrook. Perkins would later recall how Uncle John would sit in his front porch at night strumming the blues, beside him "a gallon bucket full of coat oil rags that he'd burn to keep the mosquitoes off him." The boy Perkins would wander across the field to sit and listen to him. It was from the accumulation of these experiences that he decided he wanted to play music for a living. By the late 1940s, a band comprised of Carl on electric guitar, and his brothers Jay on acoustic rhythm guitar and harmonies, as well as the occasional vocal, and Clayton on string bass, were developing a name playing the honky tonks of Jackson in west Tennessee, a town with a flourishing live music scene.

Blue Suede Shoes was Sun's best- selling single, the first to pass the one million mark

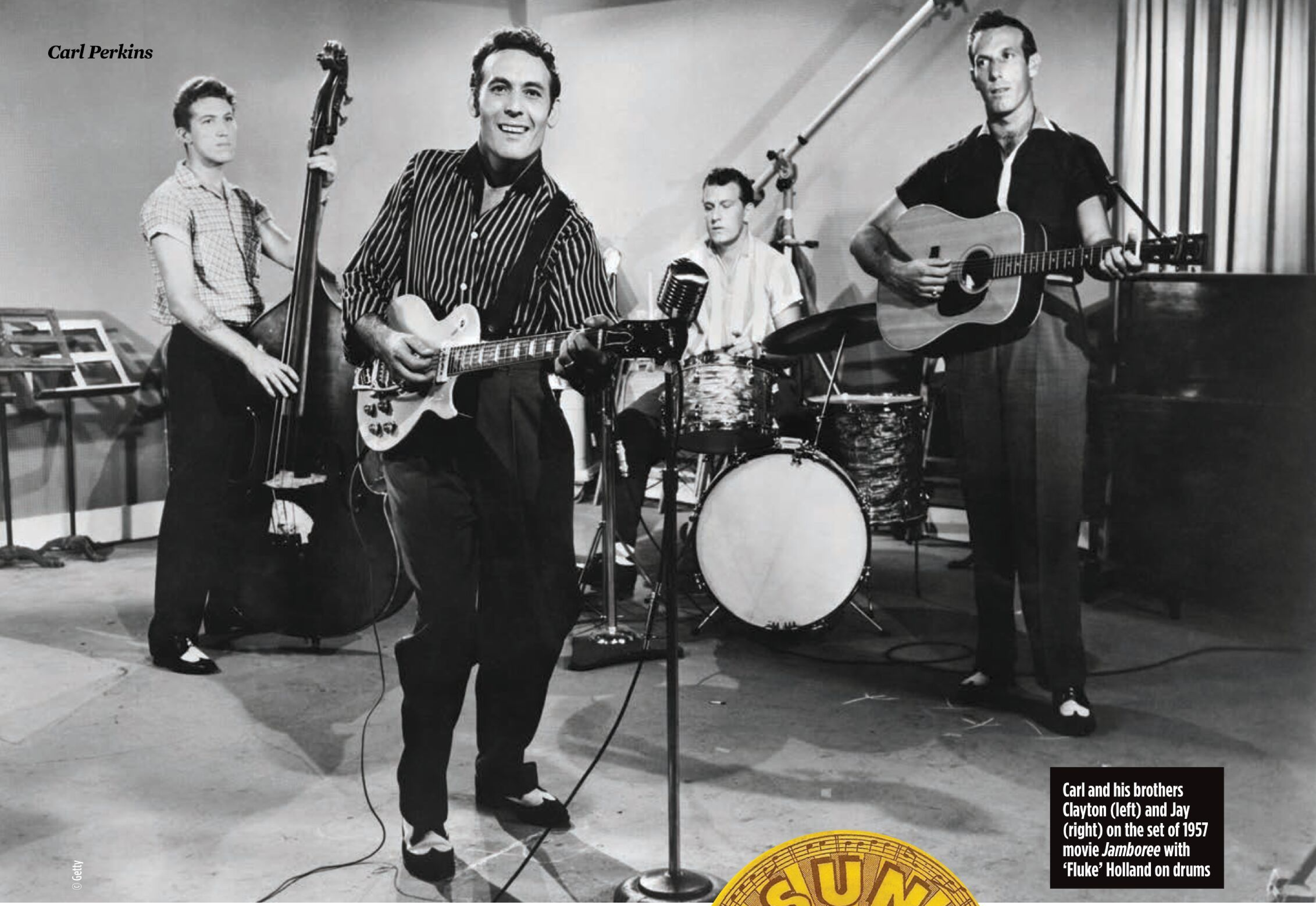
A firm case has been made that the Perkins Brothers were among the first of their generation to play what became known as rockabilly. They decided to add a drummer, and one of their earliest, Tony Austin – who went on to play with Johnny Burnette and the Rock 'n Roll Trio, and later Johnny Cash – called Perkins "the original rockabilly." The use of drums added a heavier beat more akin to the black jump outfits than the uptempo, but drummerless boogies of the hillbilly acts.

As far as Perkins himself was concerned, he was playing country music at a faster tempo, with a blues feeling. "That's what rockabilly music or rock'n'roll was to begin with," he contended. "A country man's song with a black man's rhythm." That they were clearly doing something different was evidenced by the comment of Perkins' wife when she heard Elvis Presley, whose first Sun single had just been released, singing on the radio in 1954. "That sounds a lot like you, Carl," she remarked. Her husband agreed, later admitting it was hearing Elvis' souped-up version of Bill Monroe's *Blue Moon of Kentucky* that made him believe he had a chance of making a real go in the business "because it was exactly what I was doing."

But when the Perkins brothers arrived at the Sun studio in their battered 1941 Plymouth, at first Sam Phillips told them he was too busy to listen. He later admitted to Perkins that he'd never seen a more "pitterfuller-lookin' fellow" when he rejected them, and Carl had begged him to at least let them play him one song. But, he added, "I was so glad I relented. Once you

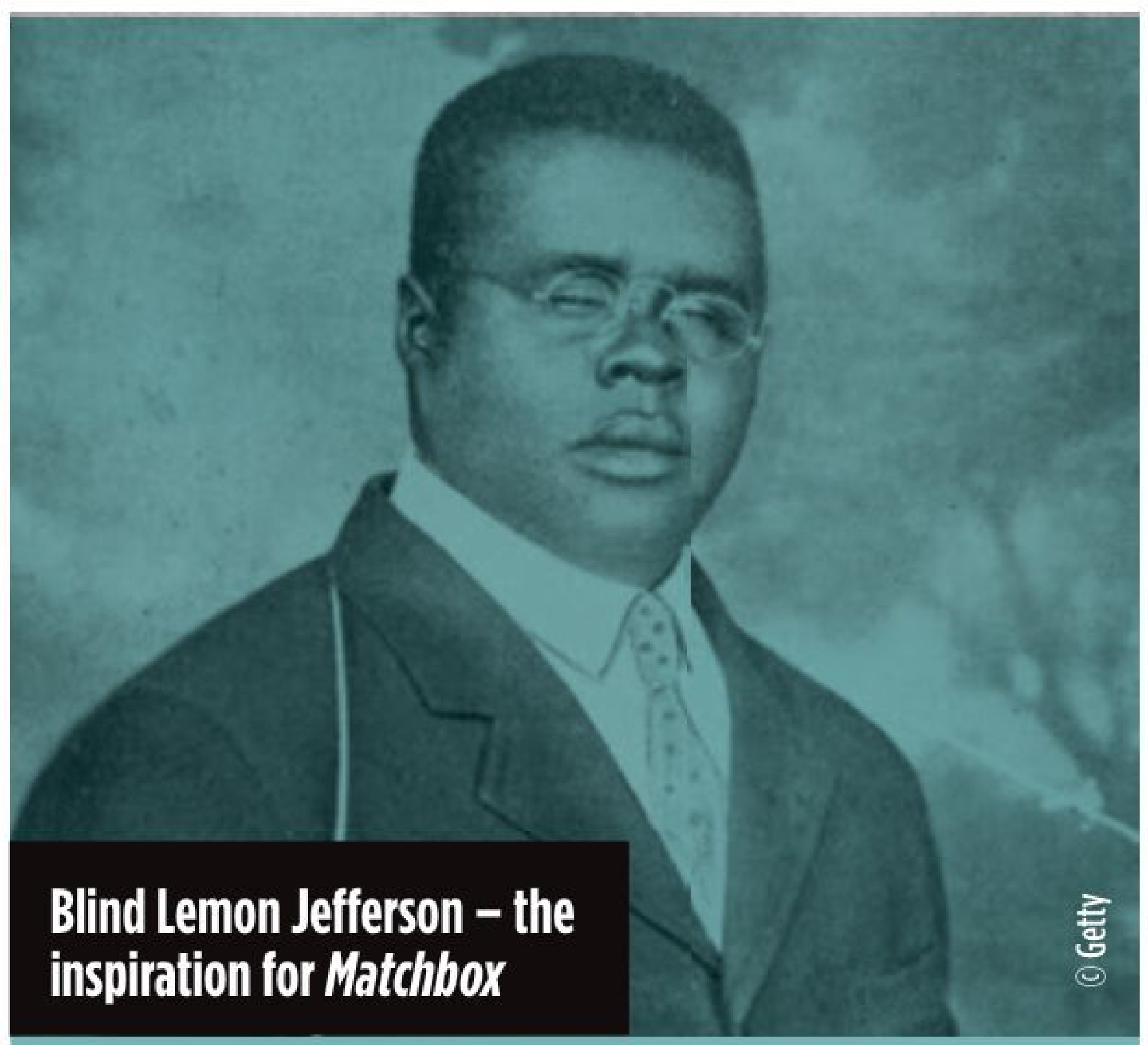
Carl Perkins poses with his trusty Gibson six-string for a 50s publicity shot

© Alamy



© Getty

Carl and his brothers Clayton (left) and Jay (right) on the set of 1957 movie *Jamboree* with 'Fluke' Holland on drums



Blind Lemon Jefferson – the inspiration for *Matchbox*

© Getty

PERFECT MATCH

The Million Dollar Quartet gathering in Memphis in December 1956, came at the end of a Carl Perkins recording session, on which Sun's latest recruit Jerry Lee Lewis played piano. The high-quality single that was to be the outcome of the session was *Your True Love*, released as the top side, backed by *Matchbox*. While *Your True Love* is a good song, probably better suited to the style of Ricky Nelson (a huge admirer of Perkins who would include a lovely version of it on his debut album *Ricky*), it is *Matchbox* that has received more attention with the passing of time. Based on an old blues number *Match Box Blues*, recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson in the 1920s, Perkins' recording blazes away on the back of Lewis' pulsating boogie rhythm, over which Perkins fires off some limber blues riffs. Included on Perkins' *Dance Album*, released in 1957, this would be one of the songs The Beatles seized upon in the 1960s, helping ensure Perkins' work remained familiar to a new generation of rock fans.

SUN
U 176 (BMI)
Hi Lo Music
Vocal
2:48
BLUE SUEDE SHOES
(Perkins)
CARL PERKINS
234
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

played you overpowered me." Phillips had immediately seen that Perkins had something different about him, both in his singing and in his playing.

The first Perkins single, released by Sun, in 1955, and also the first to be released on its new Flip subsidiary, featured one of the songs they'd done at that first audition. *Movie Magg* was a fabulously shuffling country number Perkins had written at just 14 and had been singing to friends and family for years. The lyric was a rustic one about a young guy trying to evade his girlfriend's "doggone" father and his double-barrelled shotgun, and take her to a picture show on the back of his "ol' horse Becky." Perkins was still only 22 around the time of the recording, but he sounds older. His voice has none of Presley's youthful freshness, sounding more like a "hopped up Hank Williams," as writer Peter Guralnick has put it. Yet his singing is loaded with feeling, and the song cracks along to an incredible rhythm. It was paired with another original, the sobbing country ballad *Turn Around*, complete with sawing fiddle and steel guitar, on which the debt to Hank Williams was again obvious.

If *Movie Magg* was stylistically hard to classify, so was *Gone, Gone, Gone*, paired with another country weeper, *Let The Jukebox Keep On Playing*, for the follow-up. Perkins' vocals on *Gone, Gone, Gone* are ragged and loose, delivered in his own style, seemingly owing nothing to anyone. There were no smooth edges with Perkins, and in the rasp of his voice lies the clue to why he never could match Elvis' mass appeal. Yet his vocals are totally committed, and his guitar playing, whether out front tearing off a lick, or sinking back alongside the bass and drums to drive along the beat, was to fire the imaginations of many future rock musicians.

Although *Turn Around* had been a regional hit, narrowly missing out on the country chart, the follow-up had not sold well, but Perkins was about to make a breakthrough. With Elvis' departure to RCA at the end of 1955, suddenly Phillips was looking for another artist to promote as his future stable star, and when Perkins sang him a new song he'd written called *Blue Suede Shoes* down the phone line one morning in December 1955, he reckoned the singer he once called "the greatest plough hand there ever was" was about to step up to the plate.

The origins of the song's lyric have been the subject of various accounts. It was said that Johnny Cash gave Perkins the phrase: "Hey man, don't step on my suede shoes" having got it himself from an appearance-conscious colleague he'd served alongside in the US Air Force in Germany. The lyric itself has been said to have come to Perkins in a fit of overnight inspiration, so that he was forced to quickly scratch it down on a potato sack. Perkins' drummer 'Fluke' Holland recalled it different. The Perkins and Cash bands frequently travelled together, and Holland recalled hearing Cash, who had been urging Perkins to cut "a new bop song," tell him to write a song about suede shoes. A bit later, playing a gig in Jackson, Holland said Perkins heard a guy in the audience telling his girl, "don't step on my new shoes," and pieced it all together from there.

> **Never a pretty boy, nor a pretty singer, he was an unreconstructed country lad**

What's undoubted is that the song, recorded in December 1955 and rushed out for the start of 1956, is an R&B and rockabilly hybrid. A stop-time original, it did pull the idea for its opening lines from one of Bill Haley's earlier rockin' recordings *Whatcha Gonna Do* on which Haley sings, "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready and – ah – here I go!"

Backed by *Honey Don't*, *Blue Suede Shoes* was an instant success, eventually going on to land Sun their first million-seller. Its success in the country, pop and R&B markets made it the complete crossover song. Perkins and his brothers were now in big demand, but in the attempt to capitalise on the opportunities, probably drove themselves too hard. Sheer fatigue was partly to explain for a car accident the band was involved in while heading to New York for an appearance on the top-rated Perry Como TV show, at that time one of the cornerstones of American popular culture. The vehicle driver was killed, and Jay Perkins suffered a fractured neck, putting him out of action for six months. Carl and Clayton's injuries were less severe, but it meant a serious loss of momentum when they needed to be out on the road and in front of the cameras taking full advantage of their hit song.

In fact, Perkins would never come near repeating the song's success. The follow up, *Boppin' The Blues*, scraped in at No.70 on the Billboard, then disappeared. *Dixie Fried* didn't even manage that, although it is now one of his most highly regarded compositions. Part of the issue may have been that Perkins just didn't sound young enough for the teenyboppers who were supposed to be buying this material. So, for Perkins' next single *Your True Love*, Phillips tried speeding up the track so that Carl, and his brothers on backing vocals, sounded much younger. That song didn't catch fire either, topping out at No.67. While all three songs did well enough to reach the country chart Top 20, Perkins grew increasingly despondent.

In January 1958, disillusioned by the way Sun seemed to be applying most of its resources to other artists like Jerry Lee Lewis, Perkins signed a contact with Columbia. While he never made anything there to match the quality of his Sun recordings, he did scrape into the charts with *Pink Pedal Pushers*, a song he'd originally experimented with at Sun, and *Pointed Toe Shoes*. Both were penned by the artist, however, whereas much of his Columbia material was to be written for him, to the exclusion of his attacking guitar and the sense of spontaneity so apparent at Sun. On *Levi Jacket (And A Long Tail Shirt)* a saxophone handled the instrumental break. Perkins would later say that the accomplished professionalism of the Nashville session men on these Columbia recordings intimidated him and quietened him down. If so, this was regrettable, because Perkins had a powerful, soulful voice that, given the right material, could have been just as effective in the 1960s.

Ultimately, it is not so difficult to see why Perkins never made it as a star. Never a pretty boy, nor a pretty singer, he was an unreconstructed country lad. There was nothing smooth about him, even when he sang his Columbia ballads. Yet listen to the Sun records today, and they are as exciting as anything from their era. Like much of the best music they don't sit in any definable category, and they certainly didn't in 1956. As Perkins recalled in 1996, two years before his death, "At the time, this music was so new, there wasn't really a name for it. Some of the guys in Nashville heard it and said, 'They're rockin' up our music.' So 'rock' and the label 'hillbilly music' were joined at the hip as 'rockabilly.'" ✶

Discovering
CARL
PERKINS
Eastview, Tennessee
1952 - 53
BEAR FAMILY
CARL PERKINS
WILCOX-GAY
RECORDIO DISC

DISCOVERING CARL

There was a lot of excitement a few years ago when the earliest, previously unreleased, recordings made by Carl Perkins before he joined Sun in 1954 were released on a vinyl LP by Bear Family: *Discovering Carl Perkins – Eastview, Tennessee 1952-53*. Here, it was claimed, was going to be final proof that Carl Perkins really was the first rock'n'roller. Actually, the tracks just confirmed him as an authentic country performer with a keen and soulful sense of the blues, or as he would have put it, "blues with a country beat."

His *Good Rockin' Tonight*, possibly cut a year or two before Elvis Presley recorded it for Sun, is a swinging, churchified country blues boogie. He sings Eddy Arnold's *There's Been A Change In Me* but with his rough, lazy drawl seems closer to Jimmie Rodgers than the smoother Arnold. Among the other tracks on the 10-inch disc are rare outtakes from Perkins' earliest Sun days. It's the raw energy of these, especially the cherished *Gone, Gone, Gone*, that remind you of his early brilliance. But you just need to listen to *Movie Magg*, on his first Sun single, to know what the man was capable of, anyway.

© courtesy of Bear Family

The Life Of Riley

Of all the "woulda, coulda, shoulda" rock'n'roll stories, none would have, could have, and should have hit the big time more than Billy Lee Riley...

WORDS BY **ROCKO JEROME**

Sam Phillips: "Ever since the day I set foot in Memphis, which was in 1939, I've always been a person of philosophy. Some of it's pretty corny, some of it's not all that good, and I don't know that you'd want to stake your life on some of my philosophy, but I mean I have lived by philosophy. And I sure do like for people to correct me."

Billy Lee Riley: "And I know that for sure, because you philosophised to me a lot of times."

Sam: "Billy had a bad case... or a good case... of feeling like he was overlooked."

Billy: "And I was."

(From the documentary *Good Rockin' Tonight: The Legacy Of Sun Records*.)

WHERE ELVIS WAS destined for the matinée, Carl Perkins embodied the very essence of rockabilly, and Jerry Lee Lewis was a volatile mix of unfathomable talent and caustic self-destruction, Billy Lee Riley mastered the dark menace of the blues, with his raspy rhythm and blues vibe and a delivery that left little doubt that he was a man not to be messed with. None felt more adult and competent.

He was born in Pocahontas, Arkansas, in 1933 and, like many people from that region, a bit of Native American blood coursed through his veins. He grew up hard through the Great Depression, his father taking jobs wherever he could, including time as a painter and sharecropper. Billy Lee heard country on the radio and blues in the fields. It penetrated his mind, and he grew up with dreams of making money by making music. He would win a talent show at age 14, but soon after standing behind a mic for the first time, he would learn to shoot a firearm as a 15-year-old soldier. His sister would cheat and bear witness on the age of consent forms, declaring Private Riley a fair and square 18-year-old. The army was a way out of crippling poverty and he was thrilled at the general issue three square meals and a cot. He would spend the next few years meeting other enlisted musicians and playing in bands, learning the harmonica and how to work a crowd for all they were worth.

Once discharged, he got a gig truck driving in 1955. It was clear he was destined for just about anything else after he wrecked twice. Music seemed to be an obvious choice. He set about writing tunes and looking for a way in. Right from the start of his career he was a force to be reckoned with. *Trouble Bound* was the tune that brought him to the proverbial party, the mid-tempo ballad of a man about to do something terrible when he comes upon his woman and another man drinking and living it up at a crowded bar. It thuds along like a thunder rumble in the distance, the calm before the storm that could prove deadly. This was no *Peggy Sue* saccharine puppy love:

Well, the barroom, it was crowded,
Everybody there was high,
That's when I seen my baby,
While I was passing by,
And I couldn't understand it,
Didn't think she'd let me down,
She was with another,
And I was Trouble Bound.

SUN
Hi Lo Music, Inc. BMI
U-264 Vocal
RED HOT
(Emerson)
BILLY RILEY
The Little Green Men
277
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Billy Lee sang the words he wrote like he was relating them to his arresting officer just hours after turning the head of the man who cuckolded him into a canoe. The tune was cut as the first outing for producer Jack Clement's Fernwood Records. When it attracted Sam Phillips' attention, the man behind Sun Records bought the rights to the song, the label, and hired both of the men outright.

It was 1956. The future looked bright for Billy Lee Riley. For a handsome man with chiselled features possessed of a captivating voice and natural charisma, getting signed to the label that had introduced the world to Elvis Presley felt like a major coup. Stardom had to be a mere heartbeat

➨

Billy Lee Riley

Were it not for the financial investments made in Jerry Lee Lewis' career, Billy Lee Riley might be a household name today…

away. In early '57, Phillips would set his new find before the cream of the crop of his session men. Along with Roland James, the guitarist whom Billy Lee brought along, the band would be rounded out with Marvin Pepper on bass, Jimmy Van Eaton on drums, and one Jerry Lee Lewis on piano.

They would function as the well-oiled rifle, firing frontman Billy Lee Riley like a blazing hot bullet. A cash-in on a current sci-fi fad, *Flyin' Saucers Rock'n'Roll* would be a mere cornball novelty in lesser hands, but it was played and sung with such raw power that it never fails to raise goosebumps, even (or maybe even especially) when the record is spun today. The song gave the band their name: Billy Lee Riley And The Little Green Men.

Crowds went wild and literally ripped the green felt suits off the band and their leader, but the single sold poorly. Still, all involved (short of Jerry Lee Lewis, whose plate was quickly becoming full) were intent on trying again.

Next time around, they crafted a masterpiece that would stand the test of time, and become an anthem for rockers in decades to come: a take on Billy "The Kid" Emerson's *Red Hot*. A raucous number with a singalong chorus that was at least as good as any other number the likes of Alan Freed would be blasting, *Red Hot* had success written all over it…

But the record stalled when the promotional juice wasn't behind it.

Phillips, for his part, felt that putting all his label's support behind Jerry Lee Lewis was nothing less than doing God's work. "You can save souls!" he had pleaded with the piano-slamming dynamo during a drunken recording session. "How can the Devil save souls?" Lewis shot back. That defiance would only make the Louisiana wildman grow fonder in the heart and ambitions of Phillips. Undeterred, the Sun promotion machine would shine on Jerry Lee Lewis almost exclusively in 1957.

BILLY LEE WONDERED why his career went nowhere, until one day he ear-hustled Phillips on the phone in his office. The Sun King was cancelling DJ orders for *Red Hot* from states away, and telling them to pick up spins on Jerry Lee Lewis instead. That sales-driving airplay around the country was critical. If kids didn't hear the record, they weren't too likely to buy the record, and in the 50s rock'n'roll age, competition was steep. Billy Lee had a regional hit thanks to local airplay, but as noted by Memphis musician and producer Jim Dickinson in Robert Gordon's *It Came From Memphis*, "It was years before I figured out that this stuff I heard on Dewey Phillips' show wasn't popular music. I certainly didn't realise that he was playing things that nobody else played. Like *Red Hot* by Billy Lee Riley, I didn't realise that wasn't a hit until I moved to Texas for college."

Then Riley saw red. He had been delivering the goods and waiting patiently while, all along, the man he trusted was slitting his throat. His anger swerved into violence as he got lit and began destroying the studio until Mr. Phillips stepped in. The two men would talk till dawn.

No one knows for sure what was said between the two of them that night, but one thing is clear: the legendarily silver tongue of Sam Phillips would work its magic on Billy Lee Riley. He would remain a Sun Records artist for at least one more go. Billy Lee's *Wouldn't You Know* was released the same time as Jerry Lee's *Breathless*. Once again, the fair-haired boy had the favour.

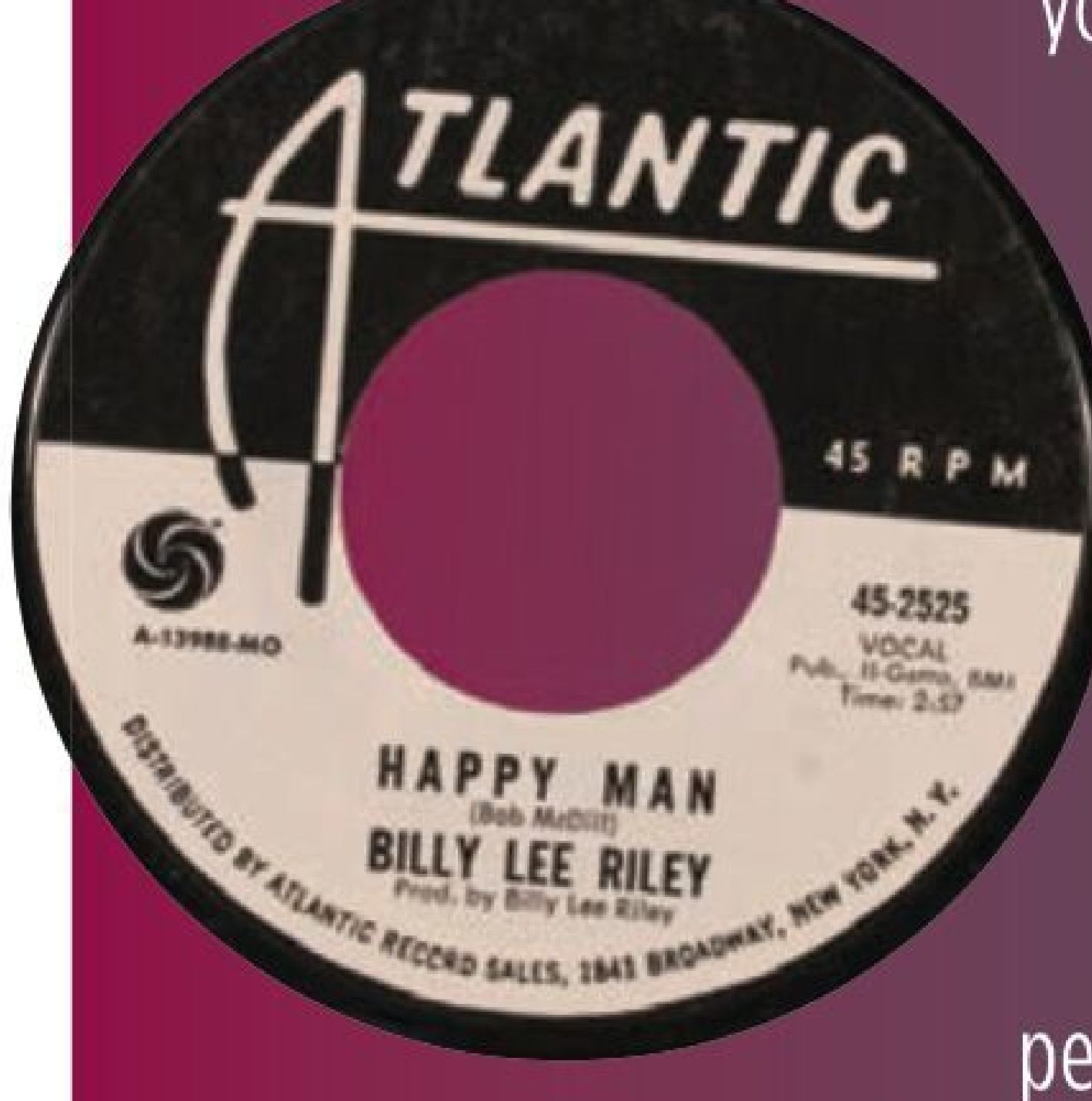
Billy Lee went to Nashville and the Brunswick label and cut a single that went

Crowds went wild and literally ripped the green felt suits off the band and their leader, but the single sold poorly

Make me happy

Seeing Billy Lee Riley perform and get his due from the true rockabilly fans, even late in the day for him, was among the greatest thrills of my life. I first met him at David Loher's Rockabilly Rebel Weekend in Indianapolis, where he was backed up by my friends from Atlanta, The Blacktop Rockets. I made a point to seek him out and engage with him, and we hit it off immediately. When you talked to him, you actually had to keep reminding yourself just who he was and what he had done, he was so humble and personable. Audiences made up primarily of people half his age chanting his name and singing along to his songs kept him grinning ear to ear, and it was always a party when he was around. There was no doubt that he always gave 110 per cent to the crowd, often shaming much younger acts. He was on the internet, available via email, and he continued to be savvy about new music. In addition to everything else, he was a good man, a good friend, and the world is a poorer place without him.

Rocko Jerome



...Yet rock'n'roll fans in the know still flocked to hear him sing

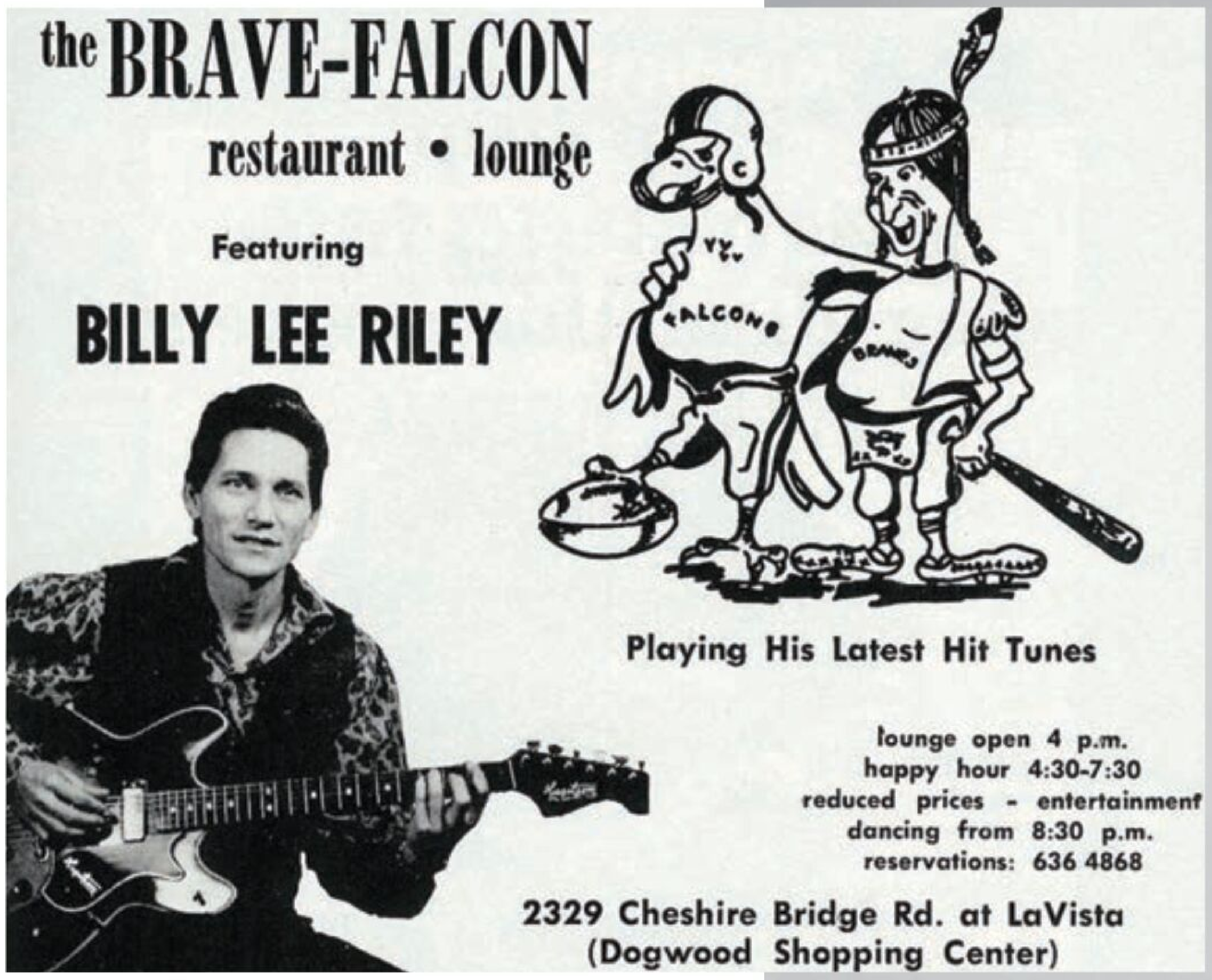
nowhere; he was courted by Steve Sholes and Dick Clark, but didn't bother to show up to the sessions. He even started his own label, Rita, which also failed to bring him his own hits, although he produced *Mountain Of Love* for Harold Dorman, a minor hit in 1959. Perhaps wary of northern major label A&R men, perhaps out of a sense of loyalty, the Red Hot Rocker would return to Sun like a moth to flame.

The years rolled by and, after its brief reign, rockabilly was no longer the thing in the public eye. Billy Lee would cut soulful shakedowns like *San Francisco Lady* and *Workin' On The River* that were as good as anything, but no one seemed to notice. If Billy Lee ever believed that the world he lived in was a meritocracy, he sure didn't by the mid-60s.

Somewhere along the way, Billy Lee Riley seemed to start making music for himself more than for any shot at fame. *Tallahassee*, a tune sung from the point of view of a father struggling to save the ➡

Riley gigging in 1999

© KEN MOTTET


FALCONS
BRAVES

the BRAVE-FALCON
restaurant • lounge
Featuring
BILLY LEE RILEY

Playing His Latest Hit Tunes

lounge open 4 p.m.
happy hour 4:30-7:30
reduced prices - entertainment
dancing from 8:30 p.m.
reservations: 636 4868

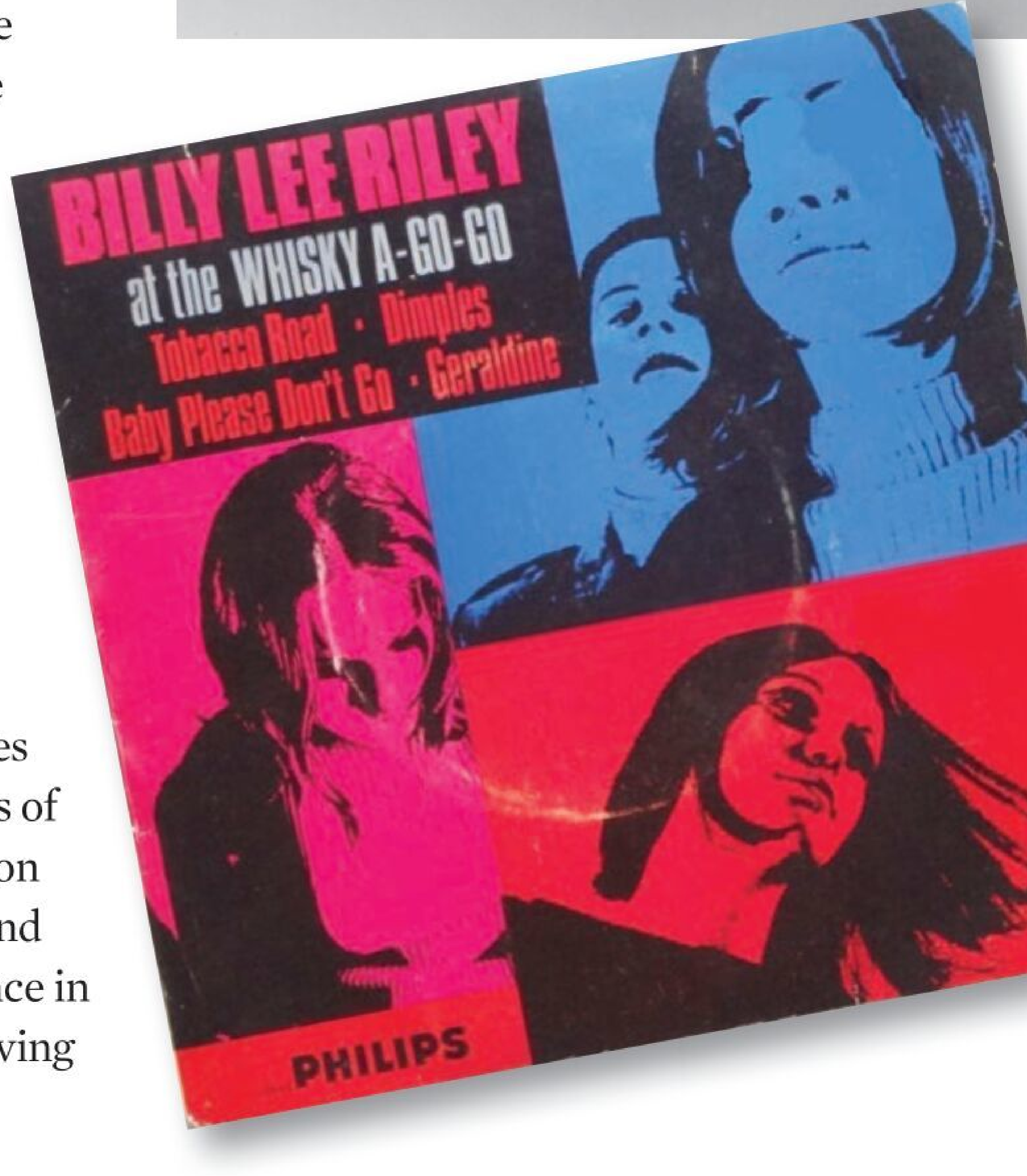
2329 Cheshire Bridge Rd. at LaVista
(Dogwood Shopping Center)

life of his sick son by moving the family to a warm climate only to have him die there and the family bankrupted, didn't exactly have "hit" written on it. The same was true of *Potter's Field*, a song about the kind of graveyard where no one goes to mourn. The words – "He once had a mother who loved him and sang him a lullaby" and "No one knows another man's woes or the depths of his despair" – gave some indication of the state of mind Billy Lee had with him at that time.

A very mature Billy Lee recorded a new tune called *Kay* for the newly dubbed Sun International label in 1969, a slow burn song sung from the point of view of a man whose woman has hit the big time as a singing star and left him holding the bag, working as a cab driver just to get by. In a Creedence Clearwater Revival groove, *Kay* was called "The best record Riley ever recorded" by Sam Phillips. It truly is a fantastic piece of work, and the fact that it's even more obscure than anything else he released tells the story of the mishandled career of this artist.

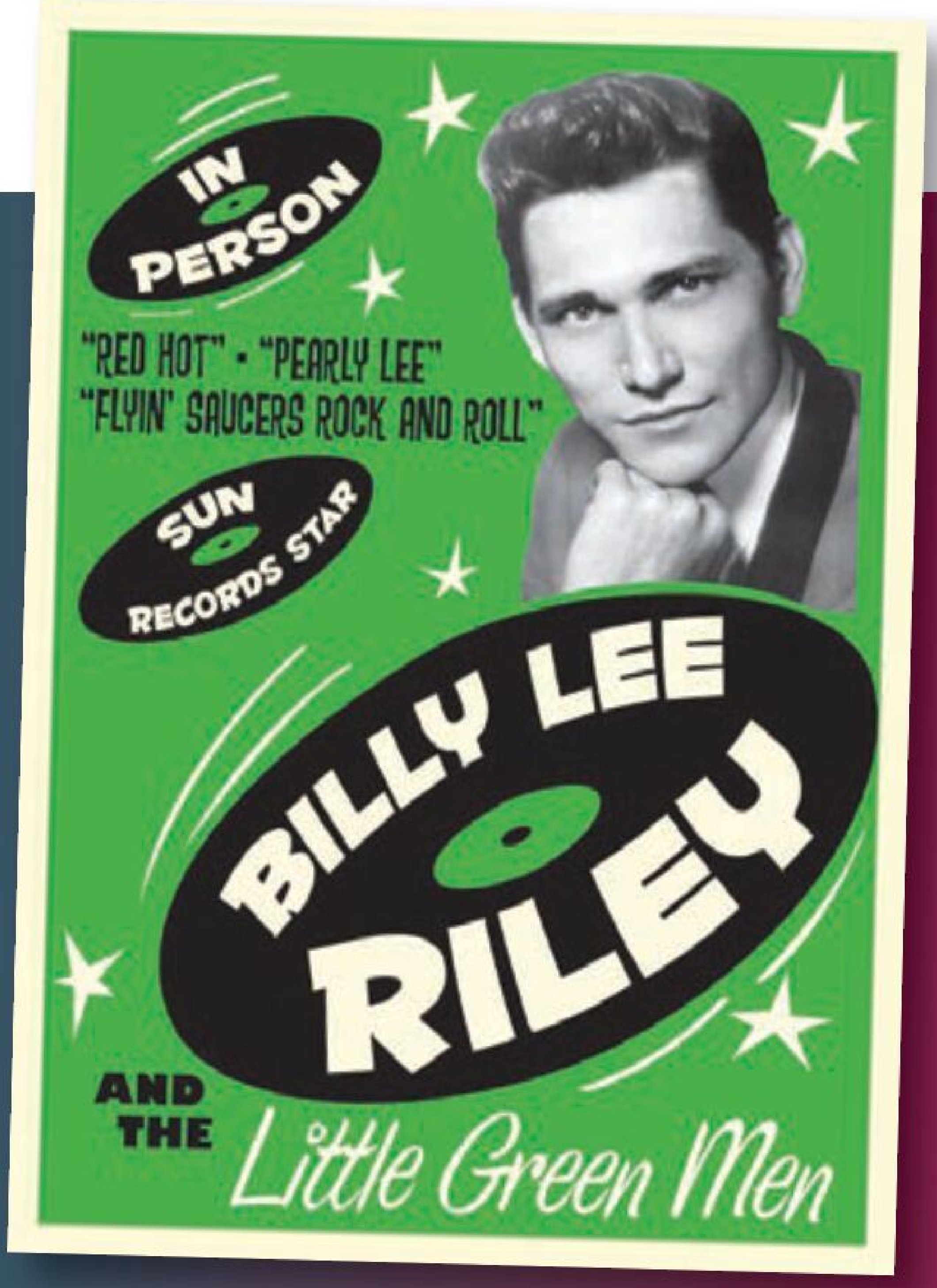
Years turned to decades. As rockabilly was revived as a pop culture cult and the ascendency of the internet transpired to create a network for kindred soul fans to communicate, festivals sprang up around the planet. Those who had drunk from the cup of fame, like Jerry Lee Lewis, often considered themselves too big to appear on a bill with the likes of latter-day rockabilly acts like High Noon or Big Sandy And The Fly-Rite Boys, and would have likely phoned a performance in if they did. On the other hand, after having worked in construction and other odd jobs to keep the lights on, Billy Lee was up for anything. He answered the call, and when he walked out in front of a crowd, any crowd at all, he could always be depended on to deliver the goods. When that man performed, he always gave it his all, intent on making that audience wonder as much as he had why Billy Lee Riley had not been a household name from 1957 to the present.

The subject would often turn, both in on-stage banter and off-stage conversation, to the role the flakiness of Sam Phillips had played in Billy Lee's life. He would joke about



© KEN MOTTET

In later years Riley relied on old standards rather than his own material

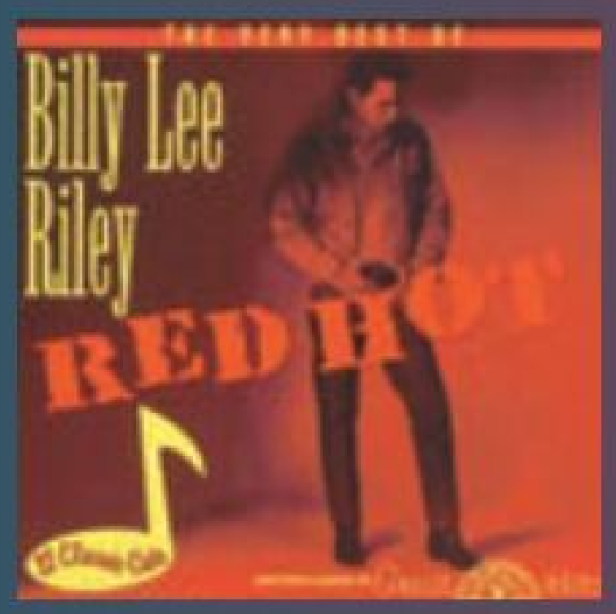


Listen up

Whether you are already a fan and want the full set, or a newcomer who wants a taster...

BILLY LEE RILEY
ROCKIN' WITH RILEY

Billy Lee Riley
Rockin' With Riley [Charly Records Limited]
A compilation of the complete Sun Records releases



Billy Lee Riley
Red Hot – The Best of Billy Lee Riley [Collectables]
For those who will be content with a solid overview

it, but it was clear that the bitterness was there inside him and burned hot. He would usually perform songs like *Shake, Rattle And Roll* and other hits made famous by others from the 50s.

When devoted fans asked him to consider playing some more of his own tunes, he would say, "I appreciate it, but nobody but you wants to hear that!"

Finally the day came when the available, surviving Sun luminaries and their erstwhile leader were brought together for a 2001 documentary, *Good Rockin' Tonight: The Legacy Of Sun Records*. Live on tape, Billy Lee finally got to give his old adversary a piece of his mind. Perhaps surprising even himself, in one breath he told him "you screwed me" and "...but I don't hate you." Phillips took the medicine well and rolled with the punch. For his part, years previously he had said, "Riley was just a damn good rocker, but man, he was so weird in many ways. He interested the hell out of me, but he was not the easiest person to deal with. When he took a drink he'd become almost a different person. He just never achieved his potential in my studio. I'm sorry I didn't do more with him. I was disappointed we never broke him into the big time."

Billy Lee made a point to alert his fans and friends to watch the programme as it aired on public television. He was noticeably different after that. In his last handful of years, he seemed content with the legacy he had built among the faithful rock'n'roll enthusiasts around the world. Always happy to sign an autograph, shake a hand, tell a story, and most especially, climb on a stage and tear a house down.

Billy Lee Riley died on 2 August 2009. Sam Phillips preceded him in death on 30 July 2003. Billy Lee mourned the loss as that of a friend.

Fortunately, his later years on this earth were marked by a peace of mind that he had perhaps been searching for throughout his life. ✶

> **"He was so weird in many ways. He interested the hell out of me, but he was not the easiest person to deal with"**
> **SAM PHILLIPS**

A happy young Buddy astride a pony in full cowboy attire, early 1940s

© Getty

IT'S A CRAZY FEELIN'

Once the young kid from Texas discovered the guitar, he never looked back. Johnny Sharp recounts the story of how Buddy Holly drew up a new blueprint for rock and pop

He may not have dropped the 'e' from the surname Holley until much later, but as far back as anyone could remember, he had always been 'Buddy'. Charles Hardin Holley was, as his mother put it, "too long [a name] for such a small boy", and the nickname perhaps reflects the indulgence with which Buddy was parented compared to his three considerably older siblings. His father Lawrence Odell 'LO' Holley earned as little as 21 dollars a week sometimes in various odd jobs around the small city of Lubbock, Texas, but as keen amateur musicians, he and his wife Ella made sure they could afford such essentials as musical instruments and lessons.

Nonetheless, Buddy didn't play an instrument properly until he went to JT Hutchinson Junior High at the age of 11. At first he was taken by the piano, but he also was impressed by his brother's guitar, on which eldest brother Larry duly began teaching him. By 13, he was playing Hank Williams songs on the bus to school, imitating Hank's distinctive hiccupping vocal mannerisms – an influence that would endure.

© Holley Family/John Beecher

Looking to the future: Charles Hardin 'Buddy' Holley in his high school years, circa 1953

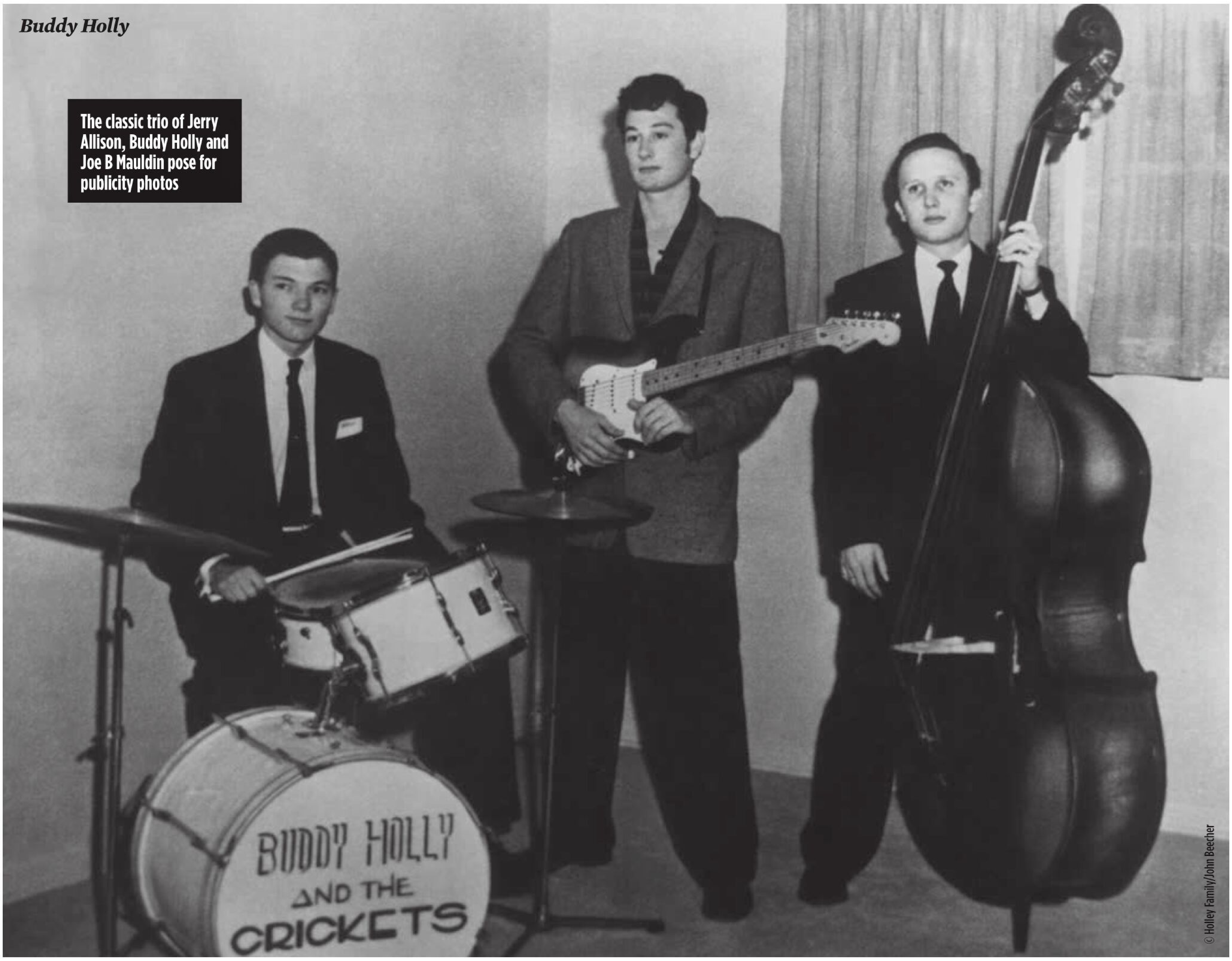
He joined forces with schoolmate Bob Montgomery, another keen guitar player, and the pair soon began listening intently to bluegrass, vocal duos such as The Louvin Brothers, and R&B acts such as The Clovers. They were also thrilled by the gritty blues of Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins, and that conflict remained within Buddy – the good Baptist boy with an attraction to the wild side (although he dated local girl Echo McGuire from the age of 15, he is said to have had less than chaste encounters with less conservative girls he and his friends encountered). Meanwhile, Buddy and Bob were no strangers to the edgier end of West Texas society, given their enthusiasm for playing shows anywhere and everywhere.

WHILE LUBBOCK WAS a God-fearing place and one which has been described as "the buckle of the Bible belt", the city always had a strong music scene, and that reputation was boosted when the country's first all-country music station, KDAV, began broadcasting from there. By now Buddy was also playing regularly with a singer named Jack Neal, several years his senior. In 1952 they auditioned for a new artists' showcase, and before long the slot became simply 'Buddy and Jack's Sunday Party'. Their repertoire, mostly country with some R&B and blues thrown in, soon included racier tunes such as *Work With Me Annie*, a Hank Ballard & The Midnighters R&B hit banned from many a white pop station for its evidently sexual subject matter.

'Hi-Pockets' Duncan, a DJ at the station, offered to manage the duo, and when Jack Neal bowed out of the duo at the end of 1954, Bob Montgomery stepped back in, and it became 'the Buddy and Bob show'.

As 1955 dawned, so did the age of rock'n'roll, and Elvis Presley – then simply known as the 'hillbilly cat' – was thrilling and corrupting teenagers across the south. He would play several times in Lubbock that year. Buddy and Bob were just below him on the bill one of those times. They befriended the shy teenager, and even gave the future King a guided tour of their home town.

➡


BUDDY HOLLY
AND THE
CRICKETS

The classic trio of Jerry Allison, Buddy Holly and Joe B Mauldin pose for publicity photos

© Holley Family/John Beecher

But it wouldn't be a show with Elvis that provided their first big break. Instead KDAV's general manager Pappy Dave Stone, a keen supporter of the band, managed to get Buddy, Bob and Larry (Welborn, now their regular upright bass player) together on a bill with Bill Haley and Jimmie Rodgers Snow, hoping it would impress Nashville talent agent Eddie Crandall and showcase their talent for 'Western and Bop', as Buddy and Bob's business cards now described it – with one foot in country and one in rock'n'roll.

Crandall was duly impressed, as was a Nashville agent named Jim Denny, to whom Crandall passed on Buddy's demo recording. He sounded out Paul Cohen at Decca, who was keen to sign a rockabilly singer in the wake of Elvis' success over at RCA, and Cohen offered to sign Buddy Holly (misspelling his name on the contract, which he chose not to correct)... but not his musical partner Bob Montgomery.

With characteristic generosity, Bob didn't stand in his way, and Hi-Pockets didn't either, honouring a verbal agreement to tear up their management contract once Buddy got a deal. Meanwhile, big brother Larry lent Buddy the money to buy a brand new Fender Stratocaster. 1956 had dawned and the future for the 19-year-old Buddy Holly looked very bright indeed.

Roping in a backing band in the shape of local musician friends Don Guess (bass) and Sonny Curtis (guitar) along with trusted drummer Jerry 'JI' Allison, Buddy set off for Owen Bradley's Barn in Nashville, only to find that Paul Cohen was insisting that his musicians weren't up to the job and he'd have to be backed by local session men.

Who was Buddy to fight such a move? Producers and labels had the power back then, but history would absolve him, as the resulting single, *Blue Days, Black Nights*, lacked bite in the backbeat and seemed to fall between country and rock'n'roll styles, largely thanks to musicians that didn't really understand anything but the Nashville way to play.

DECCA
MFG'D BY DECCA RECORDS, INC., NEW YORK, U.S.A.
MARCA REGISTRADA
RECORD NO. 9-29854 45-89283 2:03
Singing with Instrumental Accompaniment
BLUE DAYS - BLACK NIGHTS (Ben Hall)
BUDDY HOLLY
DECCA
RECORD NO. 9-29854 (89280) (2:05)
Singing With Instrumental Accompaniment
LOVE ME (Buddy Holly-Sue Parrish)
BUDDY HOLLY

ON ITS RELEASE in April 1956, radio stations didn't know quite what to make of *Blue Days, Black Nights*, and it failed to sell. From that moment on, despite Cohen later allowing Buddy to record with Jerry Allison on drums, and record their own material, including a song inspired by a John Wayne movie catchphrase, *That'll Be The Day*, both the band and the label were rapidly losing faith. By the time their second single, *Modern Don Juan* finally limped out on Christmas Eve, backed with *You Are My One Desire*, the label had already thrown in the towel. They didn't really bother promoting the single and terminated Buddy's contract in January 1957, with Cohen quoted as calling him "the biggest no-talent I ever worked with".

What must have seemed like a disaster at the time was a blessing in disguise; if one of those ➡

> ‘Big brother Larry lent Buddy the money for a new Fender Stratocaster. The future looked bright’

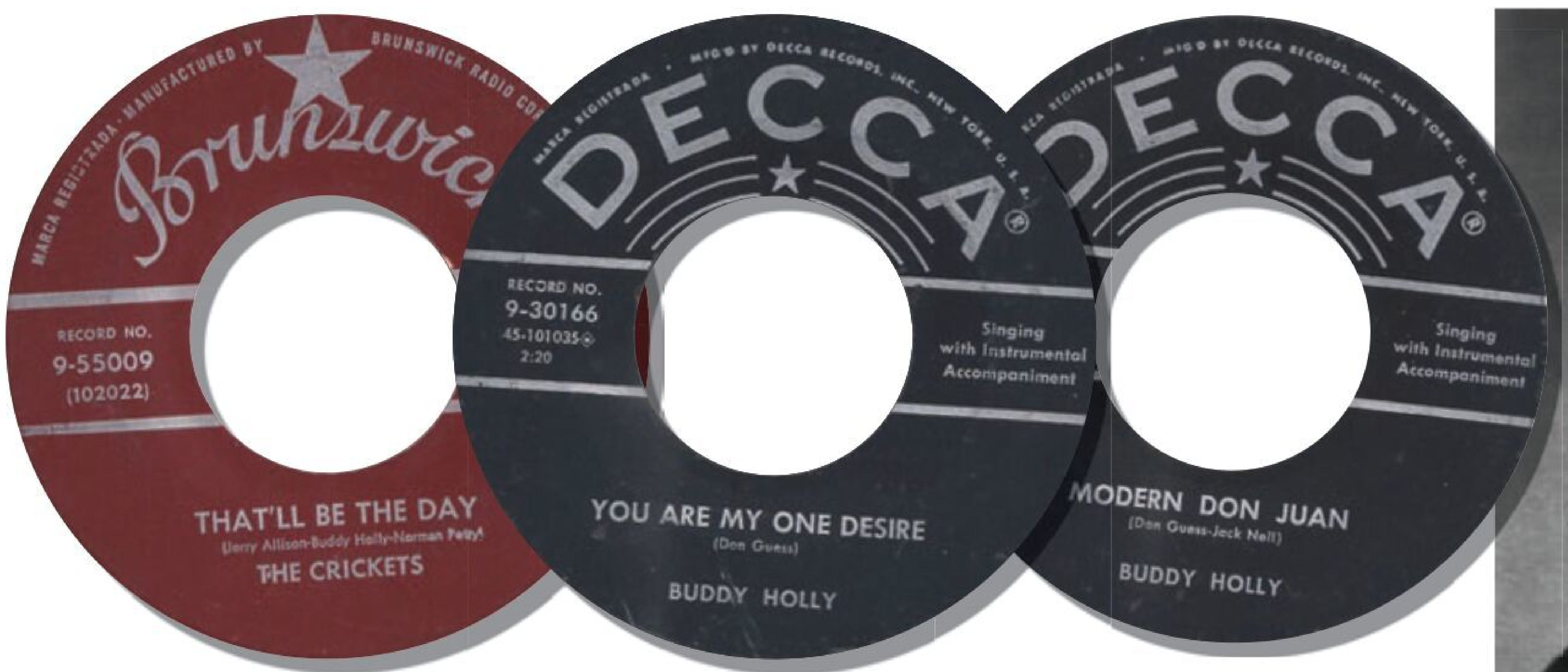
Bruno
&
Hollywood
nyc

A smiling Buddy in a promo shot by celebrity photographer Bruno

© John Beecher

An extremely rare shot of Buddy and the Crickets in full flight, with Holly's amp stage front for maximum volume

Courtesy of Peter Bradley Jnr./TBHEF/ © Peter Bradley Snr.



Decca sessions had produced a hit, Cohen's control of Buddy's creative direction would have been justified, and he might never have been allowed to grow into the artist he became. Instead, Buddy got the chance to work at establishing his own unique sound, developing his songwriting and evolving as a potent live act. Before he could do that, though, Buddy and his new band would need to add a catalyst to the mixture. His name was Norman Petty.

Buddy and company had already tried recording a few numbers with the musician-producer at his studio in Clovis, New Mexico, in the summer of 1956, hoping Decca would let them make records there. Petty was known to have connections in the music business, and with one of his charges, Buddy Knox, already enjoying a regional hit on Roulette with future Billboard No.1 *Party Doll*, his stock was high. But Petty also had a key unique selling point: as no stranger himself to studios' habit of charging by the hour and forcing artists to compromise because of time constraints, Petty charged by the session.

That meant that a group could carry on playing and recording until they reached an end result they were happy with. As such, 'Papa Norman' offered Buddy Holly and his band the platform on which to develop a sound that was truly their own.

More importantly, Petty had an ear for the emerging rock'n'roll sound that the Decca folks simply didn't share, and he was also willing to let Buddy have creative control. Before long, he would help facilitate those groundbreaking sounds in pricelessly pioneering ways –but when a bunch of lads from Lubbock showed up at his studio in February 1957, his key contribution was simply to spot a hit when he heard it.

Petty instantly liked the sound of the sharper, leaner version of *That'll Be The Day* that Buddy came in with, as well as the equally ebullient *I'm Looking For Someone To Love*, and offered to tout the two songs as a single pairing to labels in New York. The first keen interest he found was actually from a publisher, Murray Deutch at Peer-Southern, who persuaded Bob Thiele, the A&R chief at Coral Records, to sign Buddy.

One snag, though: Coral was actually a subsidiary of Decca, the label that had just dropped him, and since he'd recorded an unreleased version of *That'll Be The Day* while with them, he couldn't bring it out on any other label. Unless... the single came under the name of Buddy's new band, The Crickets, on another Decca ➡

> 'Decca's Paul Cohen was quoted as calling Buddy "the biggest no-talent I ever worked with"'

© Echo McGuire/Courtesy of TBHEF

LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO LOVE

HOLLY'S HEARTTHROBS

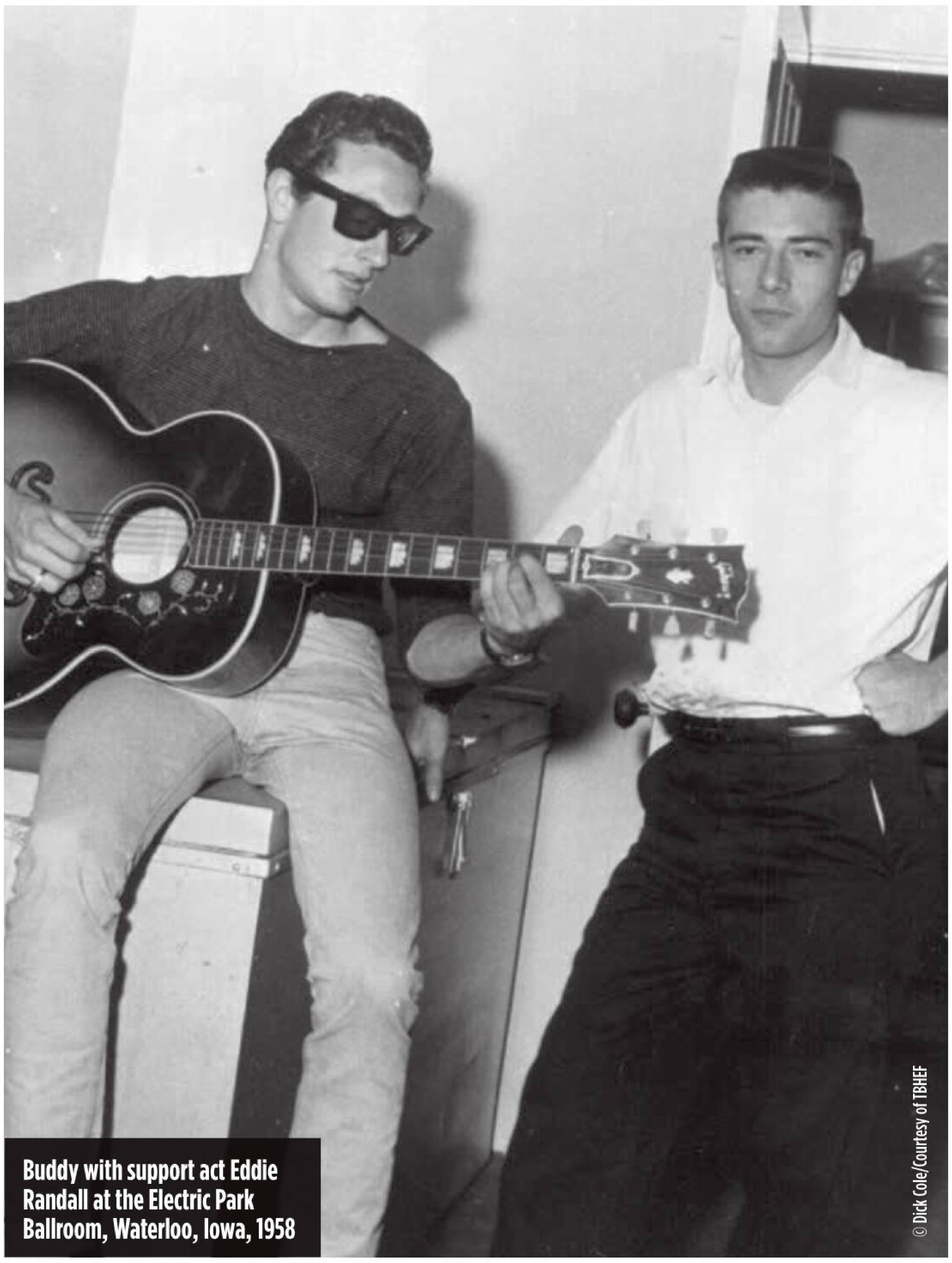
No doubt, many of Buddy's best songs were informed by events in his personal life – and some suspect that his first love never died. Buddy met 15-year-old Echo McGuire at Junior High. For five and a half years the couple dated, although for the last two of those, Buddy appeared to hold a candle for the diminutive Baptist girl after she left Lubbock for Bible college.

That said, although Buddy was stung when Echo began dating a fellow student in 1957, he did his best to move on. One woman he fell for was June Clark, the glamorous 28-year-old wife of his Lubbock friend James 'Nig' Clark. The couple had an 11-year-old son, but as Buddy's loneliness and professional frustrations gripped in the spring of 1957, he and June grew closer. Their affair intensified and she visited him in New York after his career took off, but when she refused to leave Nig for him because of their son Carley, a heartbroken Buddy gave up hope of ever winning her hand.

Meanwhile, Buddy had reworded a song he called *Cindy Lou* as *Peggy Sue* as a favour to Jerry Allison, who was wooing 17-year-old Peggy Sue Gerron. Although she and Allison later married, and honeymooned with Maria and Buddy in the summer of '58, her later claims that Buddy was in love with her are to be taken with scepticism – not least because Buddy was clearly smitten with his new bride Maria Elena, a feisty Puerto Rican who Buddy was so determined to date that he begged her formidable aunt for the privilege. She stated Buddy was the first man she had ever been out with, despite being nearly three years his senior, and although their time together was tragically short and her pregnancy sadly ended in miscarriage, she still manages his affairs and promotes his legacy to this day.

Courtesy of TBHEF

Buddy relaxes backstage with Maria Elena


Buddy with support act Eddie Randall at the Electric Park Ballroom, Waterloo, Iowa, 1958

© Dick Cole/Courtesy of TBHEF

subsidiary, Brunswick, with Coral signing Buddy as a solo artist in a separate deal, singing material he hadn't recorded while with Decca. It was a risky move, but it worked – even if, for a long time, the band wouldn't know whether their records would go out under The Crickets name or as Buddy Holly records.

IN THE CASE of *That'll Be The Day*, the debut single of The Crickets, they also didn't know when the record would come out, if at all. And once a penniless, disillusioned Buddy finally found out by calling New York to hear that it was being played on the radio, weeks still went past without further encouraging news. Meanwhile, he was preparing for a debut single release under his own name. Could he break through that way?

No, was the answer he got soon after the release of *Words Of Love* on June 20, a fate sealed by Peer-Southern hawking the song to other artists. Canadian vocal quartet The Diamonds' rather pedestrian version came out on the same day as Buddy's, eventually hitting No.13 in the Billboard charts but effectively smothering its still unknown author's release at birth.

Petty and the band persevered, though, and carried on recording in Clovis throughout a blazing summer where, in temperatures hitting well over 100˚F, they recorded several numbers including *Oh Boy!, I'm Gonna Love You Too* and *Peggy Sue*.

The story of how the song *Cindy Lou* became *Peggy Sue* is well-documented (see our *Looking For Someone To Love* sidebar), but more important was the way it was recorded. Petty built an echo chamber in the large, A-frame attic of his father's garage next door to the studio, and using some discarded stock from the Holley family's tiling business, he made reflective panels and installed a microphone and a speaker to feed the sound in and then back out to the studio. It created a trademark sound, particularly audible on Allison's paradiddles on drums, as well as the dampened rhythm guitar.

Meanwhile, good news was just around the corner. As The Crickets slept, exhausted from those marathon sessions in Clovis, Petty woke them with a telegram from Murray Deutch, informing them that *That'll Be The Day* was starting to sell well, and they would need to fly to New York to promote it. Radio stations had picked it up, some playing it twice or three times hourly, and the label were planning an ad campaign.

Norman Petty, reluctantly at first, agreed to become their official manager, and within days, they received a new $600 advance from Brunswick to put out *Peggy Sue* backed with *Everyday*, and they were soon booked on their first national tour, supporting Clyde McPhatter.

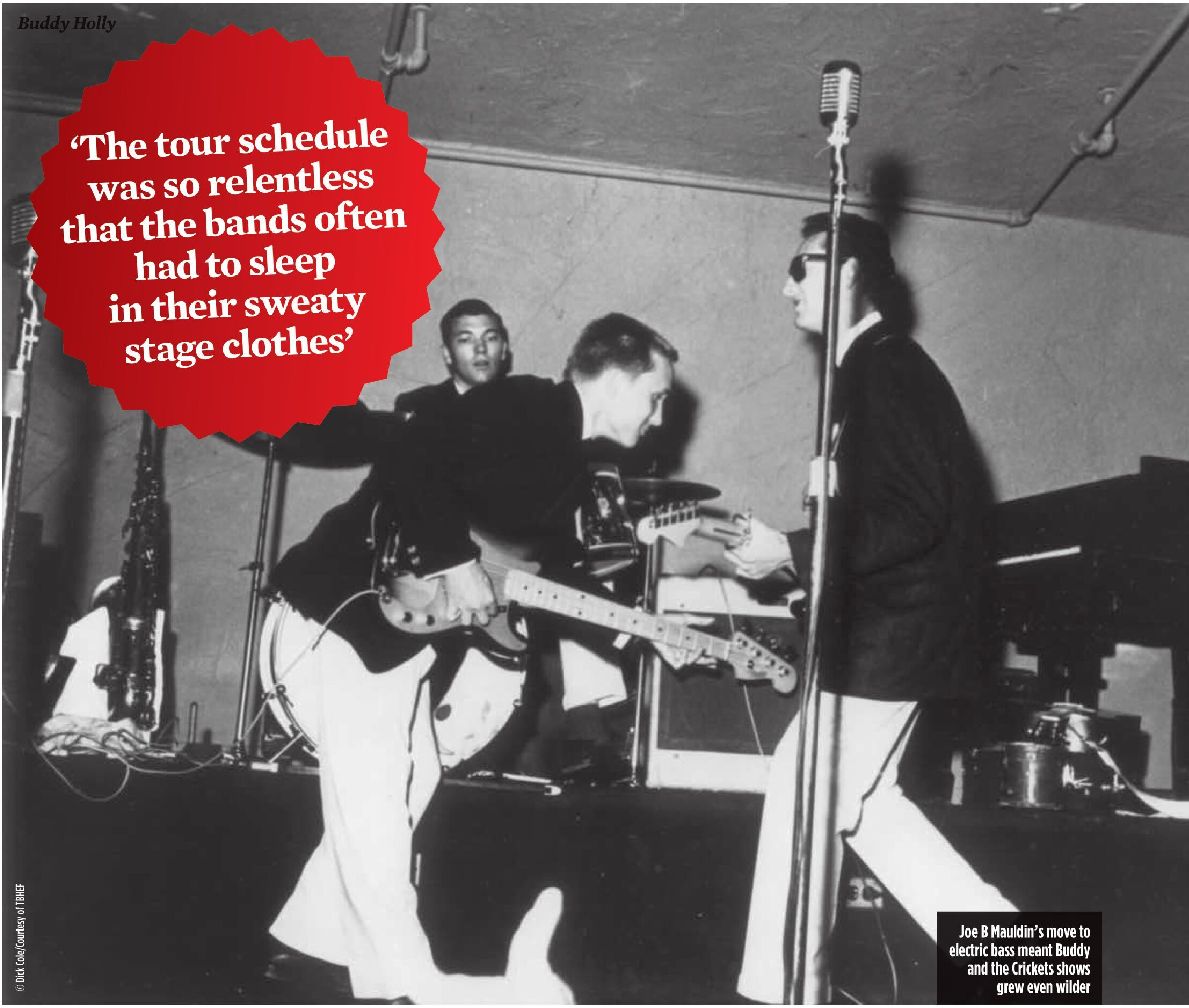
Nothing ever ran smoothly for Buddy's boys, of course, and it turned out that they'd been inadvertently booked on a tour of otherwise black acts by a promoter who assumed from their record that they were an African-American act – but given that they'd always got on well sharing a stage with black acts back in Lubbock, they took the plunge regardless, with even famously hostile crowds such as that of Harlem's famous Apollo Theater eventually being won over.

➨

Still in Waterloo, Randall and Holly share a joke with the owner of a local record shop

© Dick Cole/Courtesy of TBHEF

> **'Buddy was preparing for a record release under his own name. Could he break through that way?'**



‘The tour schedule was so relentless that the bands often had to sleep in their sweaty stage clothes’

© Dick Cole/Courtesy of TBHEF

Joe B Mauldin’s move to electric bass meant Buddy and the Crickets shows grew even wilder

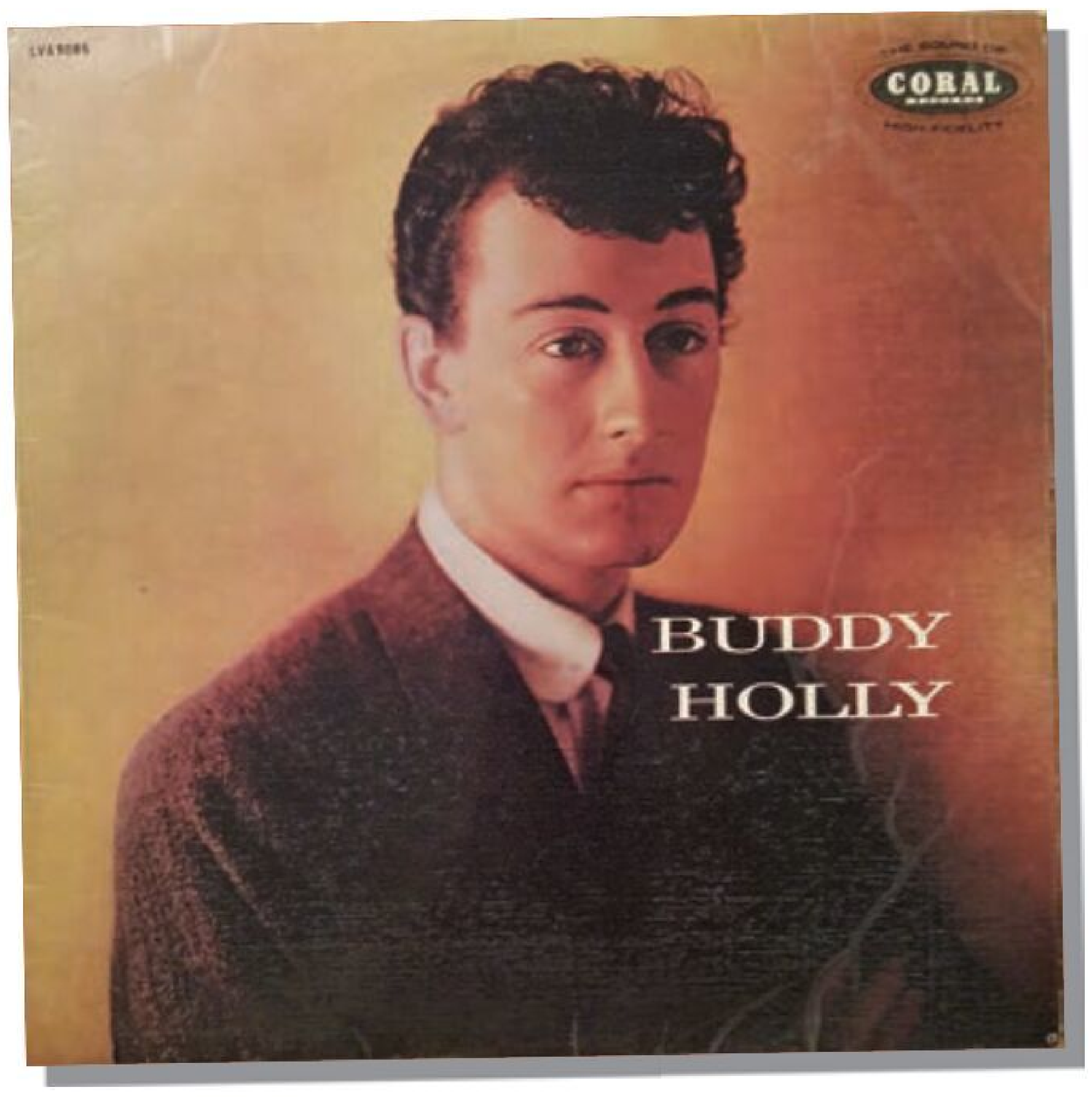
Just as *That’ll Be The Day* was reaching US No.1, *Peggy Sue* was released under Buddy’s name on 20 September and its trajectory up the charts was in marked contrast to its predecessor, quickly hitting No.3. The Crickets hit the Top 10 again a few weeks later with *Oh Boy!*, and by this time Decca had realised what they’d missed out on, cashing in with the earlier Nashville version of *That’ll Be The Day* and two singles either side of the Coral and Brunswick output, much to their performers’ chagrin.

Buddy and The Crickets were now seemingly everywhere, not least because they were also playing at least four shows a day on lengthy live package tours – a schedule so relentless that the bands often had to sleep in their sweaty stage clothes while crammed onto overnight buses free of such amenities as heating and air-conditioning to head to the next show. A mimed appearance on new primetime TV pop show *American Bandstand* further boosted their profile.

They also kept making new music. One night when Petty was playing in the same area with his own trio, he arranged for the band to stop at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma to record their third single, *Maybe Baby*, and three other tracks for their debut album, in the small hours of the morning after a show in Oklahoma City.

BUT THE STRAIN was telling. Rhythm guitarist Niki Sullivan and Jerry Allison had already come to blows as resentments and exhaustion took their toll. The year ended with what would be regarded as a landmark for any band – a debut appearance on CBS’s *Ed Sullivan Show* on 1 December. Yet all was not well in the Crickets’ camp. When they arrived back in Lubbock, Niki Sullivan announced that he was leaving the group, fed up with touring and his marginalised contribution to the band. Maybe it was no great loss in the short term, though, as the band reconvened as a trio a few days later to record more new material. The only difference? The four-way split of earnings was no more: the frontman now took 50% of the earnings, whereas the other two stayed on a quarter each.

Finally, Buddy had the opportunity and the means to give himself a little TLC. He got his teeth fixed, had a haircut, and bought a new car. His friends the Everly Brothers took him to get new stage gear from a top New York tailor, and encouraged him to change his spectacles to horn-rimmed ones. This small sartorial adjustment would make an icon of him, but at that point it was simply a statement of self-confidence – yeah, I wear glasses, deal with it!



By this time, the band's rapid ascent in their home nation had been replicated elsewhere, not least in the UK. British teens were particularly impressed that he wrote his own songs and could play his own lead guitar. And compared to the impossibly beautiful figure of Elvis, he looked accessible – you could do that too, surely – while his voice and simple songs were highly imitable.

After a trip to Australia, the trio arrived in London on 27 February 1958, with the Crickets' *Maybe Baby* climbing the charts at the same time as Buddy's single *Listen To Me* b/w *I'm Gonna Love You Too*. Once the British fans saw them in the flesh, they were further impressed: these boys really could reproduce the sound on their records, even with the weedy amplification available. For a generation of aspiring rock'n'rollers, The Crickets were clearly the real deal.

Meanwhile, Buddy had followed up *The Chirping Crickets* with a 'solo' album. Instrumentation such as acoustic guitar and organ showed he was still pushing the boundaries of his own sound, but it was the strength of the original songs that showed him as a cut above. Where many acts would produce a couple of singles and then pad out a 25-30 minute 'long player' with standards and covers, Buddy and the band offered a selection of stone-cold classics such as *Peggy Sue, Everyday, I'm Gonna Love You Too, Rave On*, and *Words Of Love*.

AS THE YEAR progressed, however, Buddy began turning more to musicians other than the Crickets, with Tommy Allsup increasingly taking on guitar-playing duties. That wasn't the only way in which Buddy was growing apart from those people with whom he'd risen to fame; while his bandmates were still Lubbock boys at heart, their leader was being increasingly drawn to the people and possibilities of New York, especially once he began to fall for Maria Elena Santiago, the pretty receptionist at Peer-South publishing.

Buddy's horizons were widening, working with top session players such as sax player King Curtis and producing rising country star Waylon Jennings. By October, he was working with a full orchestra in New York on solo numbers including *Raining In My Heart*, *It Doesn't Matter Anymore* and the beautifully arranged *True Love Ways*, and although solo singles such as Bob Montgomery's composition *Heartbeat*, backed up with the alluringly acoustic *Well... All Right* didn't manage to reach the same heights as the previous hits, he was developing quickly as an artist and recorded a further set of acoustic songs in the fall of 1958.

He and Maria had married in August of that year in Lubbock, and she had taken on the role of de facto road manager for the Crickets, dealing with promoters on tour and looking after the band's day-to-day affairs. This drew her attention to the unsatisfactory situation regarding the payment of monies to Buddy and the Crickets. Eventually Buddy split with both Petty and the Crickets towards the end of 1958, a bold step that was deemed the right one in the long-term, but a decision which left him needing to earn some money while the legal wranglings with Petty were settled, a necessity made more pressing by the fact that Maria Elena was expecting their first child.

So in the new year, Holly put a new band together with Jennings on bass, Allsup on guitar and new drummer Carl Bunch, and signed up for the Winter Dance Party, a 24-date tour across America's mid-west, with The Big Bopper, Ritchie Valens and Dion and The Belmonts and others. But once again, the tour was poorly organised and exhaustingly scheduled. And eventually, Buddy and a few fellow performers took a fateful decision: instead of braving the freezing overnight tourbus, still in their stage clothes, they would charter a plane... ✶

BUDDY AND THE HOLLEYS

CLOSE FAMILY TIES

The young Buddy Holley wasn't exactly born into a life of privilege – but without strong family support, he might never have been able to achieve what he did.

Even though Buddy's dad 'LO' Holley barely managed to scrape a living, turning his hand to every kind of job from a cook to a carpenter and a tailor, he loved music and was supportive of his son's unconventional career aspirations, making sure Buddy had what he needed to pursue his interest. Buddy was also lucky enough to have two brothers, Travis and Larry, who were nine and 11 years older than him respectively, which meant they were earning money and could help the family out both practically and financially.

Both brothers played instruments – Larry the violin and piano, Travis the accordion and guitar – while sister Pat had a strong singing voice which she would use to harmonise with her mother Ella at family gatherings. It would be Travis that taught young Buddy his first chords on a pawnshop-bought guitar.

Before Buddy and the Crickets finally made their breakthrough with *That'll Be The Day* in the summer of 1957, Larry Holley was a close confidant who stopped a despairing Buddy throwing in the towel. He lent his little brother the exceptionally generous sum of £1,000 to buy his iconic Fender Stratocaster and some stage gear, and would give him work in his new tiling business to make ends meet.

Later, one night in 1957, Buddy, his brothers and his dad used their spare tiles to build the unique echo chamber above Petty's dad's service station, which produced Buddy's trademark sound. Around the same time, it was a happy family event that inspired *Peggy Sue*, if indirectly, because the song began life as *Cindy Lou*, a composite name inspired by the birth of his niece Cindy Carol Weir, with the middle name of her mother Patricia Lou.

Britain ON THE BEAT

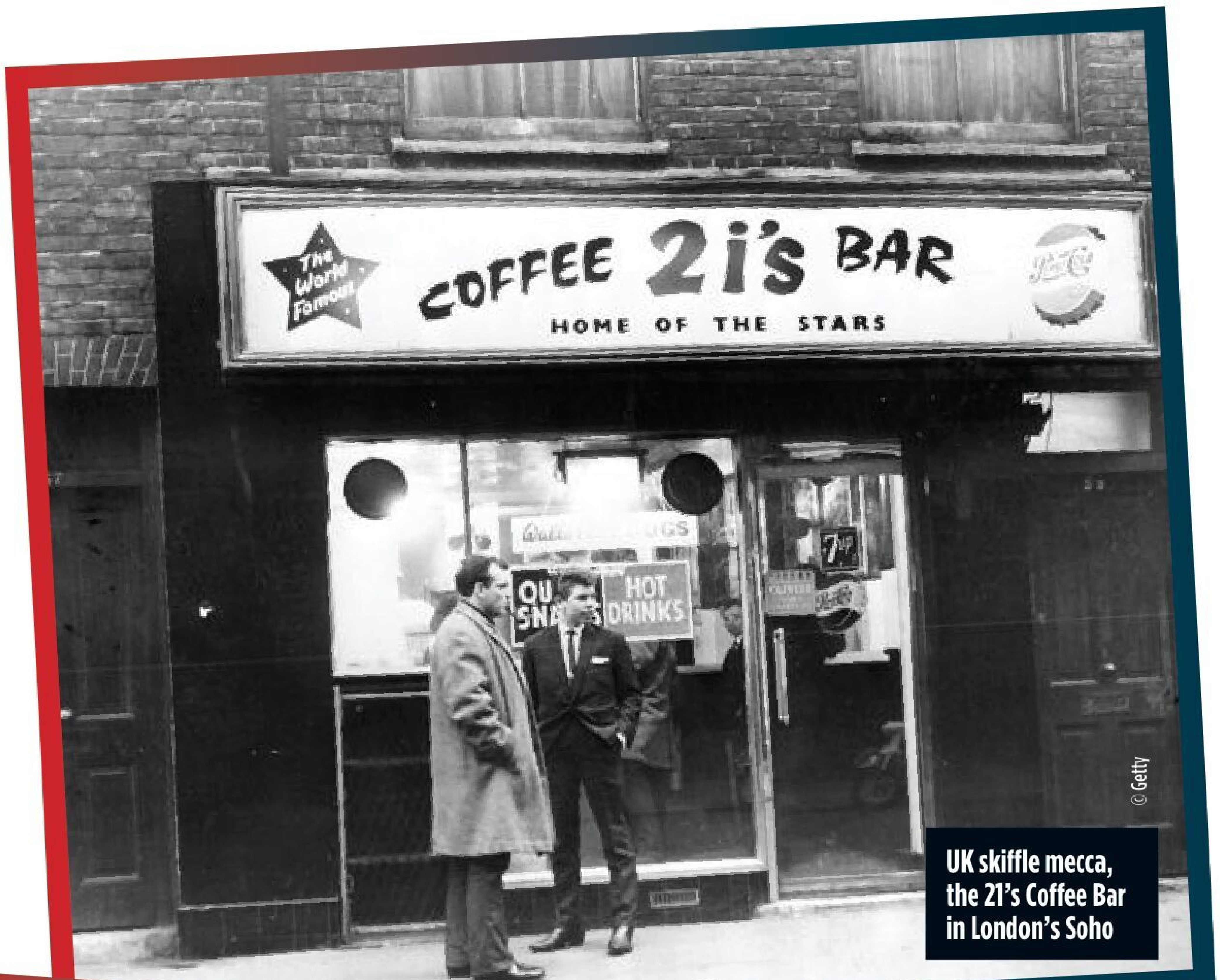
The UK can't claim to have had its own Bill or Buddy, Jerry Lee, Chuck Berry, Little Richard or Elvis exactly, but we did have some homegrown architects of rock and roll. *Vintage Rock* applauds the best of British...

WORDS BY **JULIE BURNS**

In mid-50s Britain, major change was in the air. Rationing was officially over with in July 1954, and so it seemed was the prevailing musical soundscape.

It was a case of move over music hall and variety, trad jazz and tamer chart-toppers. Goodbye grey austerity, hello the colourful youthquake that was American rock'n'roll, as heard on Radio Luxembourg. The new and vibrant, wildly rhythmic, incoming music soon took hold. Key ports such as Liverpool popularised it, with the latest vinyl gems shipped back from major cities in the US by local dockers. Seminal rocking films were also rife: *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Girl Can't Help It* with Little Richard; Elvis in *Jailhouse Rock*. The most influential was the Bill Haley And His Comets' showcase *Rock Around the Clock*, triggering some Teddy Boys to run amok, ripping up cinema seats. A year later, in February '57, Haley toured Britain to feverish anticipation – receiving much acclaim and little trouble – he said he'd back out should further riots ensue. Schoolboy Harry Webb, soon-to-be Cliff Richard, famously ducked off school to witness the rock'n'roll pioneer for himself.

With rock'n'roll, influences came fast and furious into the UK, with things coalesced in the capital. They creatively ignited at the 2i's, the cult coffee bar at 59 Old Compton Street, in London's Soho. Owners Paul Lincoln and Ray Hunter began by putting on skiffle groups; the first residency taken by The Vipers with Wally Whyton. Skiffle king Lonnie Donegan would prove 1957's flavour of the year with chart-toppers *Cumberland Gap* and *Gambling Man*. For some (notably Cliff, Vince Eager, John Lennon), skiffle was a prelude to the more exciting, amplified rock. When the music scene revved up further into rock'n'roll – first referred to in the UK as 'the big beat' – the 2i's became the coolest venue in England, attracting agents and talent-spotters, and launching the careers of several notable rock'n'roll acts. With standing room for only 20, the tiny basement featured live music performed from its small, 18-inch high stage (allegedly made by covering milk crates with planks). This quirky DIY approach was echoed in the have-a-go attitudes of many a local wannabe trying out as hit parade hero.



© Getty

UK skiffle mecca, the 2I's Coffee Bar in London's Soho

First up was Bermondsey boy Thomas Hicks, who became Britain's premier rock pioneer Tommy Steele. While serving in the Merchant Navy, his ship docked in Norfolk, Virginia, US, and Steele first heard the music of Buddy Holly and other thrilling American rock and rollers. In the summer of '56, while on shore leave, the then-seaman was spotted playing this new type of music at the 2i's. He became an overnight sensation, inspiring everyone from Cliff and The Shadows to Joe Brown and Vince Taylor. Steele's *Rock With The Caveman* b/w *Elevator Rock*, a co-write with Lionel Bart, was technically the first British rock and roll record to enter the UK Top 20 (at No.13). Subsequently, his cover of Marty Robbins' *Singing The Blues* reached No.1 in '57, and *The Tommy Steele Story* was the first album by a UK act to reach No.1 in his native country. As the UK's first teen idol, Steele, although an affable cockney chappie version of a brooding rocker, earned early comparisons with Elvis Presley. Of his formative years in the 50s, he said in his 2021 biography, *Tommy Steele: A Life In The Spotlight*: "The most exciting thing about the rock and roll era for those that started it is that there were no rules. You found you could go into a coffee bar and sing sea shanties, in my case, or country music, and no one would say, 'You're not doing that right', because, no one had ever heard it before. So you found doing those early rock and roll songs, going into theatres, they had never heard it live before. It was like a wonderful journey. You were something like a magician [...]. You walked onto the theatre stage and the place used to go wild. They were going wild for me, but mostly for the music."

Britain's first rock'n'roller: Bermondsey boy Tommy Steele was knighted in 2020, aged 83

© Getty

As Steele's career stretched to more wide-ranging entertainment – from Britain and on to Broadway and Hollywood – the next idol along was the now similarly evergreen Cliff Richard. Cliff has said that in mid-'56, his "world changed forever on hearing *Heartbreak Hotel* drifting from a car radio. When I heard Elvis, the next step for me was to try to do it." Sporting sharp threads, quiff and a curled lip, within six months, the teenager had gone from his first professional engagement playing a Clacton holiday park to causing public pandemonium. By the end of '58, some press reports described Cliff's musical approach as "savage".

Like Elvis, he was accused of "crude exhibitionism", surprisingly by the *NME*. He was front-page news. One gig at the Lyceum in London had to be stopped as chairs were hurled and Teddy Boys pelted Cliff with coins. In Manchester, the police turned on water hoses to restrain heaving crowds of his concert fans. Ironically, given his later more pristine reputation, a 1959 edition of *Fans Star Library* decided: "This 18-year-old knows more about selling sex appeal to a feminine audience than Valentino

"You were something like a magician... You walked on stage and the place used to go wild"

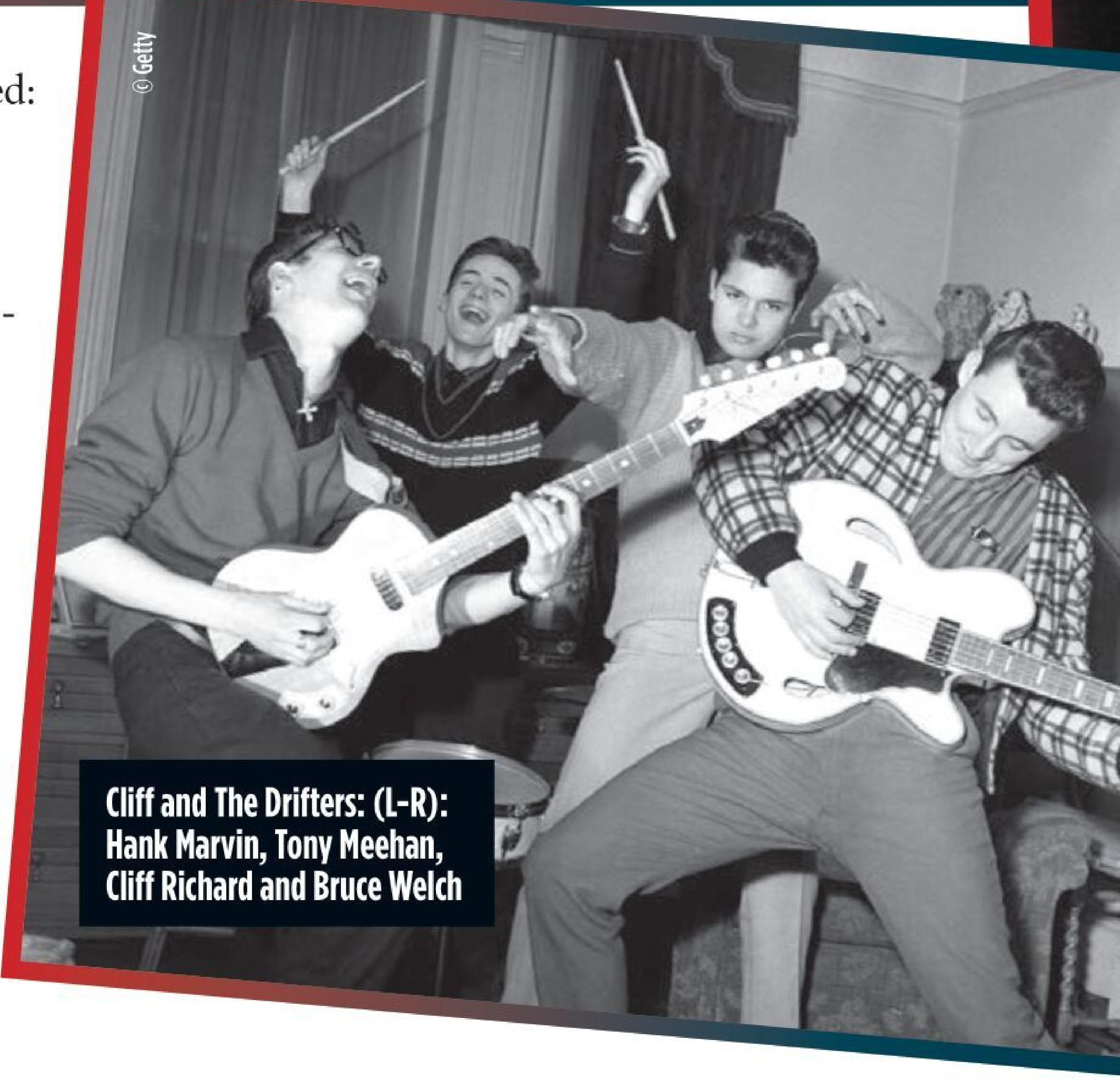
[...]. His movements on TV have shocked a whole lot of people, but [...] his weekly audience averages between eight and 15 million." This referred to his repeat hit appearances on *Oh Boy!*, ABC TV's more go-ahead teen music TV series in the wake of ITV's *Cool For Cats*, and the BBC's *Six-Five Special*. The programme featured acts like The John Barry Seven, The Dallas Boys, The Vernons Girls and Britain's first real rocking big band: Lord Rockingham's XI, behind the fine Scottish-style blaster *Hoots Mon*, and the first British composition performed by a British group to reach No.1. Other acts were Dickie Pride, 'The Sheik of Shake', known for his energetic version of Little Richards' *Slippin' And Slidin'* (sadly he died prematurely of drugs-related causes, aged 27). The most familiar face, however, was popular-yet-grounded rocker Marty Wilde. His atmospheric cut of Jody Reynold's US hit *Endless Sleep* earned him the first of several Top 20 singles. From mid-'58 to '59, along with Steele and Richard, Wilde was one of the UK's three leading rock'n'roll singers. His backing group The Wildcats featured top-flight musicians such as Big Jim Sullivan on lead guitar; Tony Belcher on rhythm; Bobby Graham or Bobbie Clarke on drums; and later – pre-Shadows – drummer Brian Bennett and bassist Brian Locking. As a singer or songwriter, Wilde has the distinction of chart success across eight consecutive decades. An enduring entertainer, he prolifically recorded and toured, appeared in four films, and later co-wrote songs for his 80s pop-star daughter Kim. Back in the day, on marrying The Vernons Girls' Joyce Baker in 1959, unlike Bachelor Boy Cliff, he perhaps prematurely relinquished his teen idol status. He had been teen TV's chief star turn until Cliff came along.

Coached in stagecraft by *Oh Boy!*'s visionary producer Jack Good, Cliff transformed from a 17-year old Elvis emulator into his own performer and promptly stole the show. His trajectory was helped in no small part by Good choosing *Move It!* as Cliff's TV debut. Good said the single was like "an electric shock down the spine", and Cliff's contribution "amazingly non-imitative". Composed by early bandmate Ian Samwell while travelling on the top of a double-decker bus, *Move it*! cemented Cliff and The Drifters' status as musical pioneers. A UK No.2, it was the first truly authentic rock'n'roll song to be written in Britain; yet rather than Abbey Road studios, it could have come out of Memphis. As iconic rocker Carl Perkins remarked: "That sound could have been made in Sun Studios in 1954." It rendered Tommy Steele's important earlier hits proto-rock in comparison, or "pseudo-rock" as Cliff himself considered. The Samwell-written *Mean Streak* and *Dynamite* were other killer cuts from Cliff in '59. His first two Norrie Paramor-produced albums, *Cliff* and *Cliff Sings*, on Columbia (EMI) peaked in the Top 5.

Cliff's first tour was a triumph. He was ably abetted by The Drifters, comprising Tyneside-to-the-2i's teen guitarists, the Buddy-

Above: Cliff Richard does his best Elvis. Opposite page: with Marty Wilde on TV show *Oh Boy!*

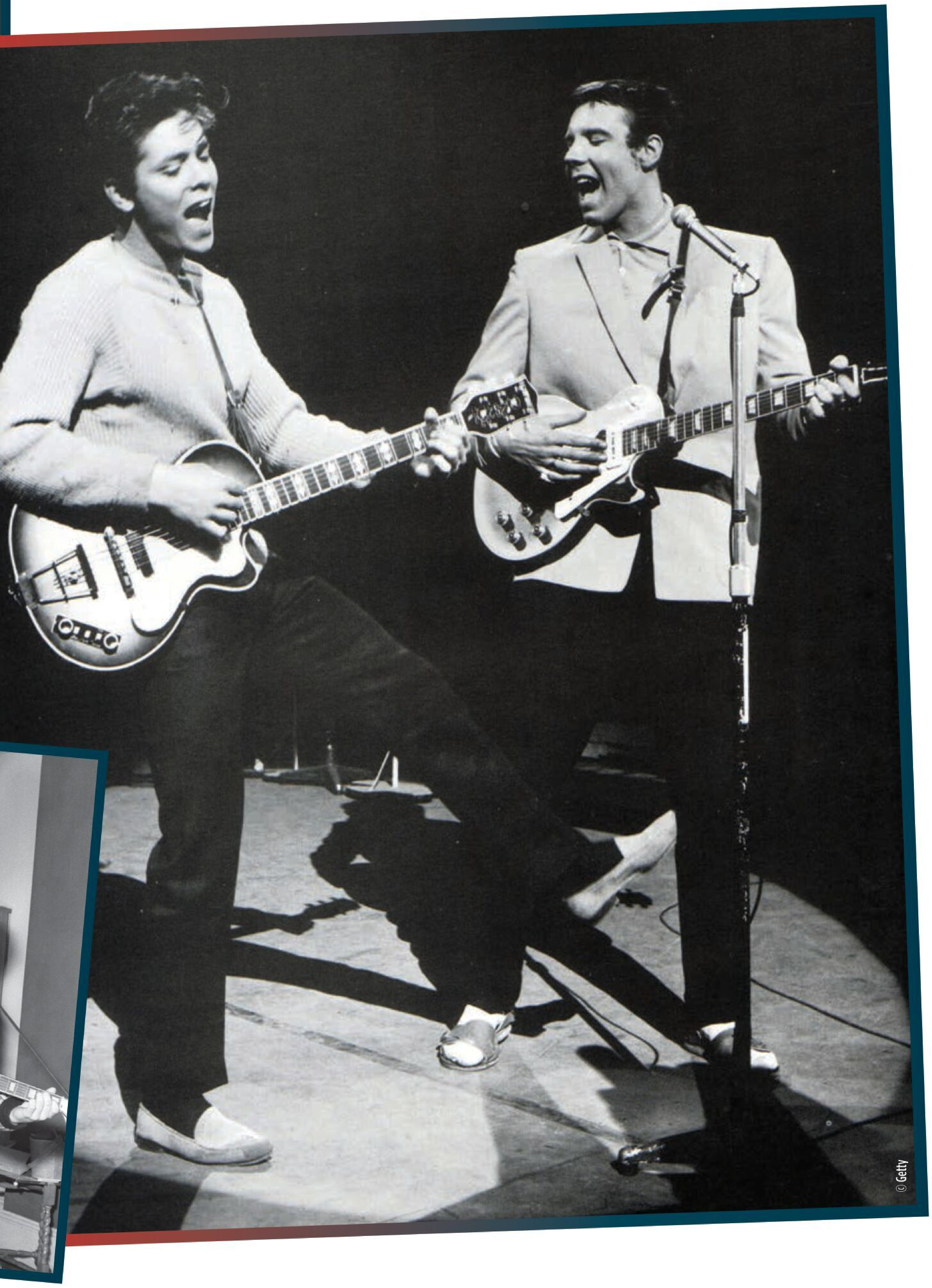
© Getty


© Getty

Cliff and The Drifters: (L-R): Hank Marvin, Tony Meehan, Cliff Richard and Bruce Welch

Holly-loving Hank Marvin and his mate Bruce Welch on rhythm, along with Terry Smart and Ian Samwell. Booked to open for US chart-toppers The Kalin Twins (of *When* fame), against Cliffmania there was no competition: he got to headline instead. Watching from the wings was another guitar great, Jet Harris. Cliff soon invited him to join the band. As Terry Smart departed, in came yet another 2i's face, dynamo drummer Tony Meehan, to accompany Marvin and Welch in a supergroup soon renamed The Shadows. Uniquely, the band could thrive on different variations. The Shadows hit the heights in their own right (*Apache*, *Kon-Tiki*, *Wonderful Land*, *Foot Tapper* et al), while Jet Harris and Tony Meehan would ultimately go on to score instrumental hits such as 1963 No.1, *Diamonds*. As for Cliff – successful both as band frontman and soloist – according to Billboard he's the purveyor of 124 Top 40 hits, with 14 No.1s and 68 in the Top 10, or as one (Apple Music) wag recently had it: "His historic reign at the top of the UK pop charts is surpassed only by Queen Elizabeth's reign at Buckingham Palace". In his long career, only success in the US has ever eluded him. Ian Samwell, meanwhile, went on to pen *Say You Love Me Too*, which was recorded by The Isley Brothers. He became the first British songwriter to write a song recorded by an American R&B act.

Of all the contenders to challenge Cliff, Billy Fury was a force to be reckoned with

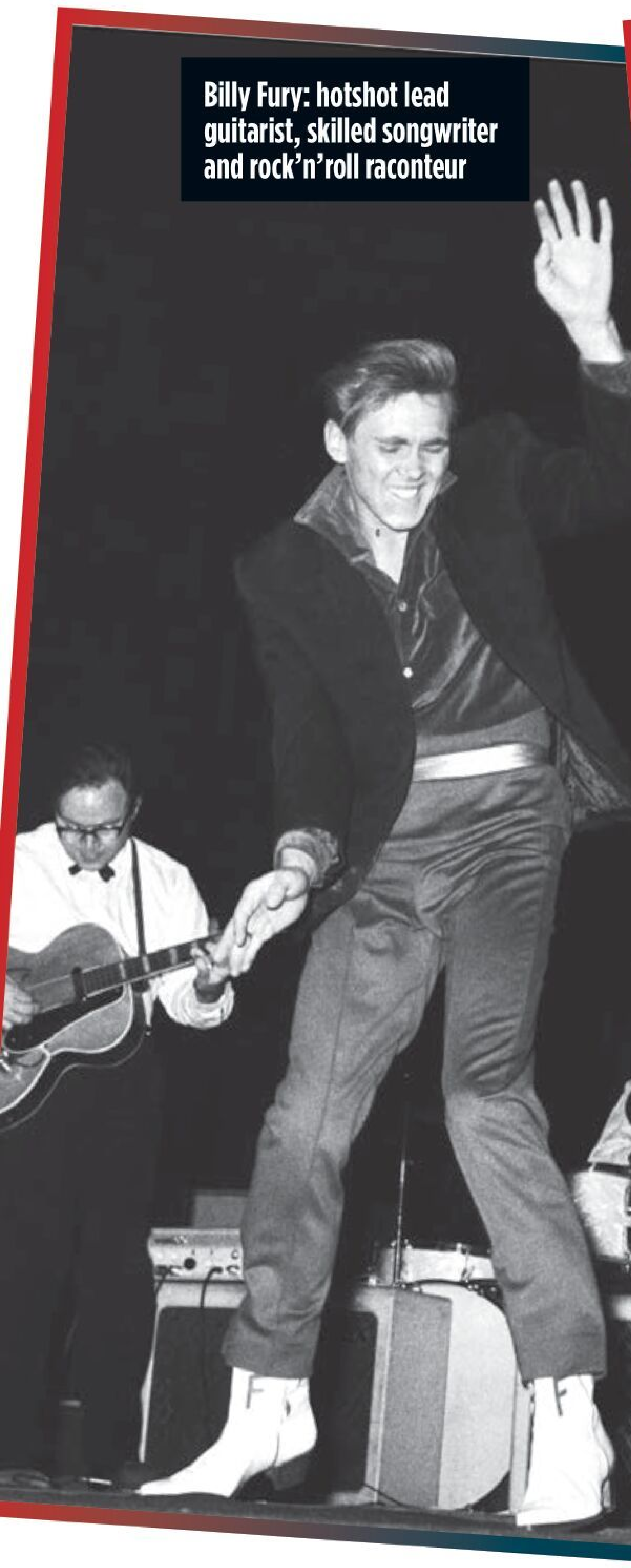

© Getty

Of all the contenders to challenge Cliff, Billy Fury was a force to be reckoned with. He became part of the stable of impresario (and Tommy Steele discoverer) Larry Parnes, that also boasted the short-lived talents of Dickie Pride, Terry Dene (*A White Sports Coat (And A Pink Carnation)*) and Johnny Gentle, to the more established Marty Wilde, Joe Brown and Vince Eager. Fury, fresh from Liverpool, was the full package: a modest boy-next-door type with matinee-idol looks, versatile rocking-to-balladeering vocals, and writer of his own recorded material including his first four chart entries: *Maybe Tomorrow* ('59), *Margo*, *Colette* and *That's Love*. Taking 18 singles into the Top 20, 1960's *The Sound Of Fury* is widely regarded as the best rock'n'roll album from a British artist of that era. Remarkably, he equalled The Beatles' record of 24 hits in the 60s. Though weak health held him back from touring abroad, when well, he remained a much-loved star, appearing throughout the 60s and on into the 70s club circuit.

Despite the early excitement, it had taken until the end of '58 – and Duane Eddy's *Rebel Rouser* – for the teen market to be viewed seriously, and for rock'n'roll in Britain to garner chart success. 1959 turned out to be a vintage year in terms of kick-ass tunes. Johnny Kidd And The Pirates, who were latterly cited by *Rolling Stone* as one of the most significant pre-Beatles British rock acts, debuted with their sparky *Please Don't Touch*, written by the aptly-named 18-year old lead singer, Kidd. Given the accolade of a US cover, it only made the UK Top 30. The landmark song was superseded by their next try, Kidd's 1960 composition, *Shakin' All Over*, before they released the third of their original hat-trick, *Restless*.

Also parking up, came the glinting *Brand New Cadillac*, a driving slice of 12-bar blues delivered by the inimitable, leather-clad Vince Taylor. Ably backed by The Playboys, the former 2i's house band comprised Tony Sheridan on guitar, Brian Locking on bass, and Brian Bennett on drums. Unthinkably, in the UK and the US it went nowhere. Today the B-side is recognised as a classic anthem. The Clash later covered the song and summing up Taylor's input to British rock, singer Joe Strummer stated: "Before him there was nothing". Despite his lack of commercial success, British-born/US émigré/back-to-Britain showman

➡



Billy Fury: hotshot lead guitarist, skilled songwriter and rock'n'roll raconteur

© Getty

Eccentric leather-clad rocker Vince Taylor

© Getty

> **Rory Storm's madcap stage tricks often resulted in hospital stays**

Taylor, with his legendary gymnastic stage antics, was a great live performer. His ever-rocking set list included his particular takes on *Trouble*, *Be-Bop-A-Lula*, *Ready Teddy* and *Long Tall Sally*. Big in France, signed to top label Barclay, for a time he became 'Le Roi Du Rock' (King of Rock). He even shared the bill with Gene Vincent. Sadly, after one LSD trip too many, calling himself Mateus, he derailed into a flaky character so fantastical that he became inspiration behind another later British rock creation, David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust – but that's another story.

If ever there were an English Eccentric Rockers club, Taylor would be its chief ahead of the later Screamin' Jay Hawkins-inspired Screaming Lord Sutch, and alongside the likes of his pink-haired peer, 'Britain's wild man of rock'n' roll', the 5ft 2-inches 'pocket rocket' Wee Willie Harris. Once resident pianist at a certain legendary venue, it inspired his 1957 debut for Decca, *Rockin' At The 2i's*, though his signature remains the frantically feral *I Go Ape*. Always in demand on TV and for his live sets, he still resurfaced in 'retro' gigs in his 80s.

Rory Storm & The Hurricanes also tick the talented-but bonkers-box. Pioneers of the Merseybeat between '59 and '62, Storm and his Hurricanes were bigger in their native Liverpool than the fledgling Beatles. They played shows together, and Rory would stand in for John Lennon when the latter was ill. Appearing on bills with Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Emile Ford and Duane Eddy, they were the first band to play rock'n'roll at the Cavern club, while bassist Walter Eymond was the first in the city to play an electric bass and use an amplifier. Livewire frontman Rory Storm's unique signature was his madcap stage tricks, which often resulted in hospital stays. He sprang from a pavilion diving board halfway through one set to crashing through the floor of Hamburg's Kaiserkeller club (deliberately). The hottest of Hurricane's non-hits can be found on Rockstar Records' *Live At The Jive Hive*.

Theories as to why the 'King of Liverpool' and his band didn't get signed abound: he relied on covers, he never developed his own set, and perhaps Beatles manager Brian Epstein sabotaged them by producing them for Parlophone – with a ludicrous single choice of *America* from *West Side Story*.

When not on stage, Storm was a star steeplechase athlete, at the same time afflicted with a crippling stammer. He may not have made it, but he embodied the spirit of rock and roll to the max. The glory-getter would be his drummer Ringo Starr, who fatefully defected to The Beatles in 1962.

"If it hadn't been for Rory I would still have been a labourer," Starr once told Rory's sister Iris, long before positing a tribute track, *Rory And The Hurricanes,* on his *Postcards From Paradise* album, in 2015.

True hits to 'what ifs' and near misses, it's all part of Britain's rich rock heritage. ✶

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

The artists who gave rock and roll a go, but fared much better in their later creative incarnations...

COLIN HICKS: Signed by Larry Parnes, Hicks would always be compared to elder brother Tommy Steele. Despite exposure on TV, UK success never came. He fared better performing *Giddy Up A Ding Dong* in the 1959 Italian film *Europe By Night*. In 1960, pre-concert in Torino, Hicks sadly lost his voice. His band became The Rokes.

JIM DALE: Produced by George Martin, several of Dale's songs made the charts: *Be My Girl*, *Just Born (To Be Your Baby)*, *Crazy Dream* and *Sugartime*. Dale's career would blossom in the *Carry On* films then Broadway, starring in *Barnum*. He also wrote lyrics for '66 film theme *Georgy Girl* – a worldwide 11 million seller.

JESS CONRAD: Played a rock star in the 1959 British TV play *Rock-A-Bye-Barney*. He sidelined into singing and, as one reviewer reflected: "His limitations as a singer have made him a legend." Regularly making the 'Worst Records' lists, Conrad's epics such as *This Pullover* are now collector's items.

SHANE FENTON: Another of Larry Parnes' troupe, Bernard Jewry had four modest pre-Beatles hits as Shane Fenton, before conquering 70s glam-rock as Alvin Stardust, starting with *My Coo Ca Choo*, and scoring a UK No.1 with *Jealous Mind*.

ADAM FAITH: Faith's debut single in 1958 featured a rendition of Jerry Lee Lewis' *High School Confidential*. Heading into pop territory, mentored by John Barry, he was given Buddy Holly-style pizzicato strings on his first runaway smash, *What Do You Want?*

THE JOHN BARRY SEVEN: Appearing on *Six-Five Special* in September '57, the band played *Every Which Way* with Barry on vocals – never a strong point. After that, they shifted to instrumentals, and John found fame as the composer behind James Bond and many other soundtracks.

Subscribe to Classic Pop, a celebration of 80s pop & chart music

CLASSIC
POP
eighties
electronic
eclectic
Boy George
at 60
EXCLUSIVE
SUBSCRIBER
COVER

BOY GEORGE

WHEN BOY GEORGE TURNED 60 IN JUNE, HE RELEASED 60 NEW SONGS TO MARK THE OCCASION AS HIS "CREATIVE DIWALI FESTIVAL". MORE THAN EVER BEFORE, GEORGE'S NEW DECADE SEES ONE OF POP'S GREATEST PIONEERS AT EASE WITH BOTH HIS PAST AND FUTURE. WITH A NEW BIOPIC ON THE WAY, IS THE SINGER – WHISPER IT – COMFORTABLE? "IF I AM, IT'S A FIGHT," HE TELLS US...

JOHN EARLS

Boy George has lived in the same house in North London ever since his first serious pop star royalties arrived. Unfortunately for both George, and a nosy *Classic Pop* reporter hoping for a glimpse of where the singer has found refuge for decades, for our Zoom call to celebrate the singer's 60th birthday,

y George is not at home.
I started renovating my house a long before the pandemic," he explains.
known then that I'd have a year of
rking, I might not have started
t done up. The same as all
rogrammes on TV, the work
over budget and, of course, it's
n with the pandemic. But,
uffering, I'm very privileged.
nore stuff in my life. Having
n't make you superior,
g up in a two-up
as a kid does mean
hing to be bigger.
s is, you find me in
tion in Camden."
George's home,
ed the lounge view
dle diffusers,
George's small
toons that
Haring's
d caricatures.
o is especially
Alongside his art, George has
n phenomenally busy making music in lockdown, releasing 60 new songs to celebrate his birthday on 14 June. Not bad for someone who says of his initial mood during lockdown: "I was reluctant to do anything. I was distracted and unable to concentrate."

George's focus was helped by going back into therapy and taking acting lessons. He's quick to stress he's not about to return to acting, having played outrageous club owner Leigh Bowery in his own musical *Taboo* in 2002. Instead, George is working with RADA acting coach Charlie Walker-Wise to hone his stagecraft. He's told *Classic Pop* before how anxious he felt on stage throughout Culture Club's rise; a worry that returned during the band's tour for their comeback album *Life*. "I started feeling out of sorts when we played Carfest two years ago," George recalls. "It made me want to work on self-empowerment and strengthening my stage presence. Acting lessons have really suited me. When I first worked with Charlie, I told him how much I like being in control. Charlie told me that was a disaster, the worst place I could be was on stage. He's right. I've learned that what's terrible is having a tension where I'm just....clenched."

He laughs loud and long, something Boy George does a lot. It's a delight to experience, as George laughs with his whole body.

Even in "civvies" – his term for not having the full Boy George slap on – George looks great: black T-shirt, neat beard, grey bandana, a general look of conspiratorial mischief. The laugh helps, as does the realisation that, at 60, Boy George is doing whatever the hell he wants: not least offering 60 new songs with no regular release pattern just because, well, how better to celebrate your birthday? "I don't think about my age," George insists.

"Being 60 isn't an achievement, it's just what happens if you manage not to die. It's random. How I choose to celebrate 60 is up to me, so I thought, 'I'll drop a bunch of music.'"

As George writes six or seven songs a week, creating 60 new tunes wasn't as much effort as it would be for some songwriters. It's also a pointed rebuke to potential record companies who want to realign Boy George's career in a traditional way. "People keep insisting I should make a covers album, which is just desperate," he sighs, eyes rolling to the heavens. "There's nothing wrong with covers – I do them all the time, and Ken Boothe's *Everything I Own* got me to No.1. But I'm a writer. That's what I do. If I was a carpenter, people wouldn't tell me not to make a table. So, if the best offer I get is a covers album, I say, 'No thank you, darling. I'm quite capable of writing songs.'"

Another full-body laugh follows, but Boy George has very little time for the traditional way of doing things. "All those old rules are done," he emphasises. "I've known since I started DJing again in the rave scene in 1987 that the old rules don't apply. The great thing about the music business is that nobody knows anything. It's run by self-appointed geniuses who've never written a lyric or been on tour, yet I'm the one who's constantly being told, 'You're wrong.' Really? I'm 60. I've learned some shit, trust me on this."

As well as the 60 new songs, George has joined the likes of Janet Jackson and Kings Of Leon in releasing art and music as cryptocurrency-style NFTs. Then there's new solo album *Cool Karaoke Volume 1* on YouTube, its 13 vibrant and infectious songs joined together as a continuous 52-minute "video" on the channel. George is as hungry to experiment now as he was when running the cloakroom at the Blitz club in 1980. "I'm surprised more people aren't doing fun things," he notes. "Everyone seems to be staying in parameters, so I tell people I work with, 'Being safe isn't really how I got here.' Nobody wanted to sign Culture Club, after all. I feel like that Groucho Marx song – 'Whatever

> I DON'T THINK ABOUT MY AGE. BEING 60 ISN'T AN ACHIEVEMENT, IT'S JUST WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU MANAGE NOT TO DIE. IT'S RANDOM.

CLASSIC POP 23

ONLY £12.50 EVERY 6 MONTHS

✚ *Classic Pop* subscribers get exclusive artist covers

classicpopmag.com/JOIN

OR CALL US ON **0844 856 0642***

ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN CALL FROM THE UK OR OVERSEAS ON +44 (0)1371 853 609

CLASSIC
POP
SCRITTI POLITTI
2021
JAPAN

CLASSIC
POP
GO WEST
THE BEST OF 2020
CYNDI LAUPER

CLASSIC
POP
NEW ORDER
Tears For Fears
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Available from WHSmith High Street and Travel stores, larger Tesco stores and all good independent newsagents

*CALLS COST 7 PENCE PER MINUTE PLUS YOUR PHONE'S SERVICE CHARGE

All Killer, No Filler

The Rise And Fall Of Jerry Lee Lewis

Chronicling the piano-pounder's dizzying climb from backwoods Louisiana to super stardom at Sun Records in Memphis… and his terrible topple from the top

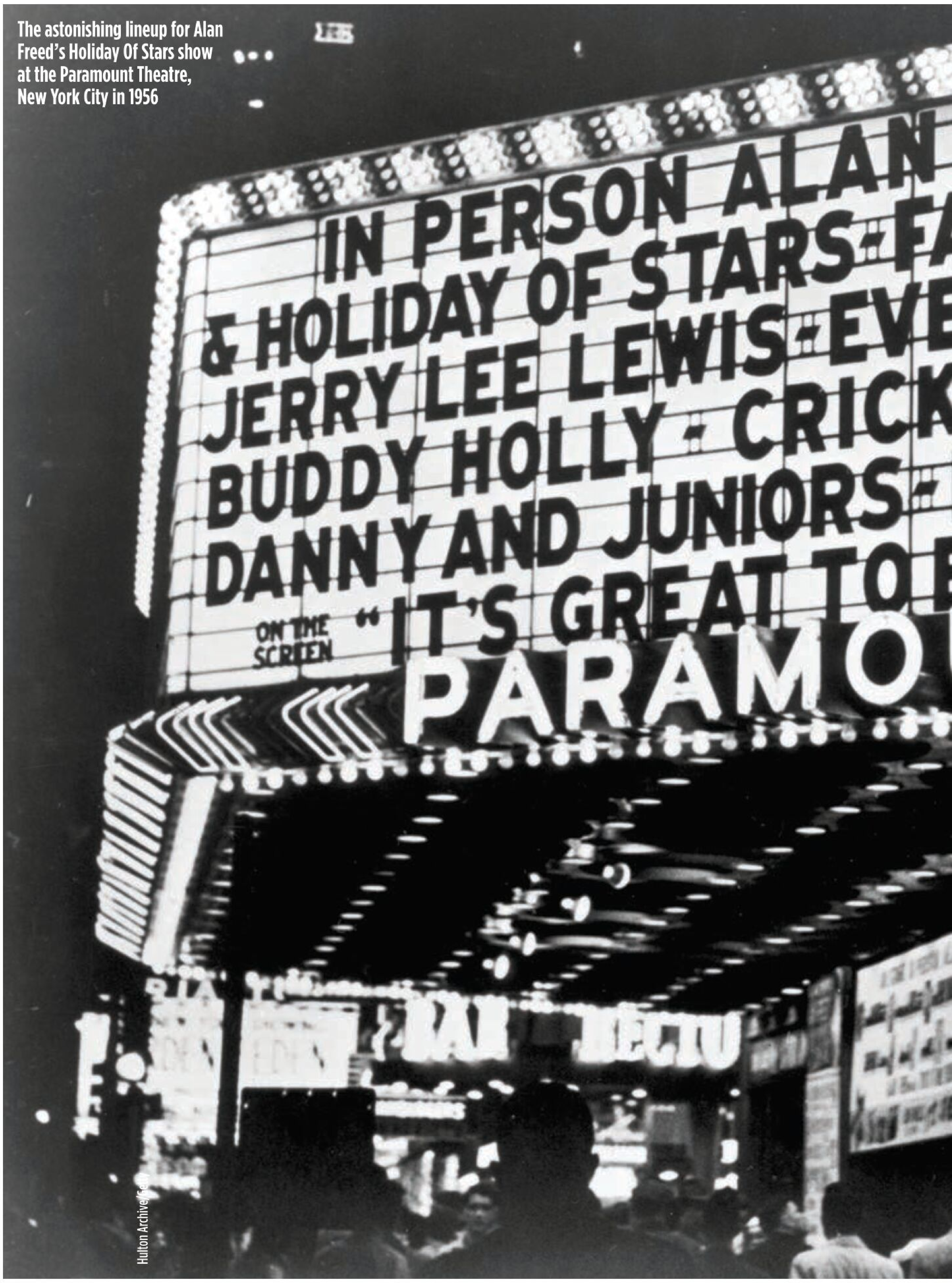
WORDS BY **DOUGLAS MCPHERSON**

After Elvis Presley had shot out of Memphis like a moon rocket, it seemed as if every singer in the South wanted the chance to cut sides for Sun Records in the hope that label founder and producer Sam Phillips could ignite their careers, too. Carl Perkins came from Jackson, Tennessee; Roy Orbison arrived from Wink, Texas; and both Johnny Cash and Charlie Rich gravitated to Tennessee from Arkansas.

Jerry Lee Lewis, a 21-year-old, twice-married piano player from Ferriday, Louisiana, wanted to join the party as much as anyone. "By recording there I knew my music would be played on the radio, and people would hear Jerry Lee Lewis music all over the world," he recalls.

The difference, however, was that Cash, Orbison, Rich, and even Elvis, would all find their greatest success after graduating from Sun to a major label. Jerry Lee, the uncontrollable blond fireball, would become Sun's biggest star, achieving on the tiny independent label what even Presley couldn't with the multi-million-selling smashes *Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On* ➨

Jerry Lee Lewis' talent would present a conflict that followed him throughout his career



The astonishing lineup for Alan Freed's Holiday Of Stars show at the Paramount Theatre, New York City in 1956

Hulton Archive/Getty

(note original Sun spelling), *Great Balls Of Fire, Breathless* and *High School Confidential*, plus a sinus-clearing hit cover of *What'd I Say* that completely demolished the original by Ray Charles.

As Sam put it at the time, "No one anywhere has ever recorded an artist like Jerry Lee Lewis!"

JERRY LEE WAS born into Depression-era poverty in Ferriday, Louisiana, on 29 September 1935. Times were made even harder for the family when his elder brother, Elmo, was killed by a drunk driver when Jerry was just three years old. His father, also called Elmo, was in prison for brewing moonshine at the time.

When his father was released, the family moved to Black River, a snake-infested rural locale that – according to Jerry's younger sister, Linda Gail – made Ferriday look like Manhattan. Eking out a living picking cotton, the Lewises had few comforts in their lives except the scarily fundamentalist Assembly of God church – and music.

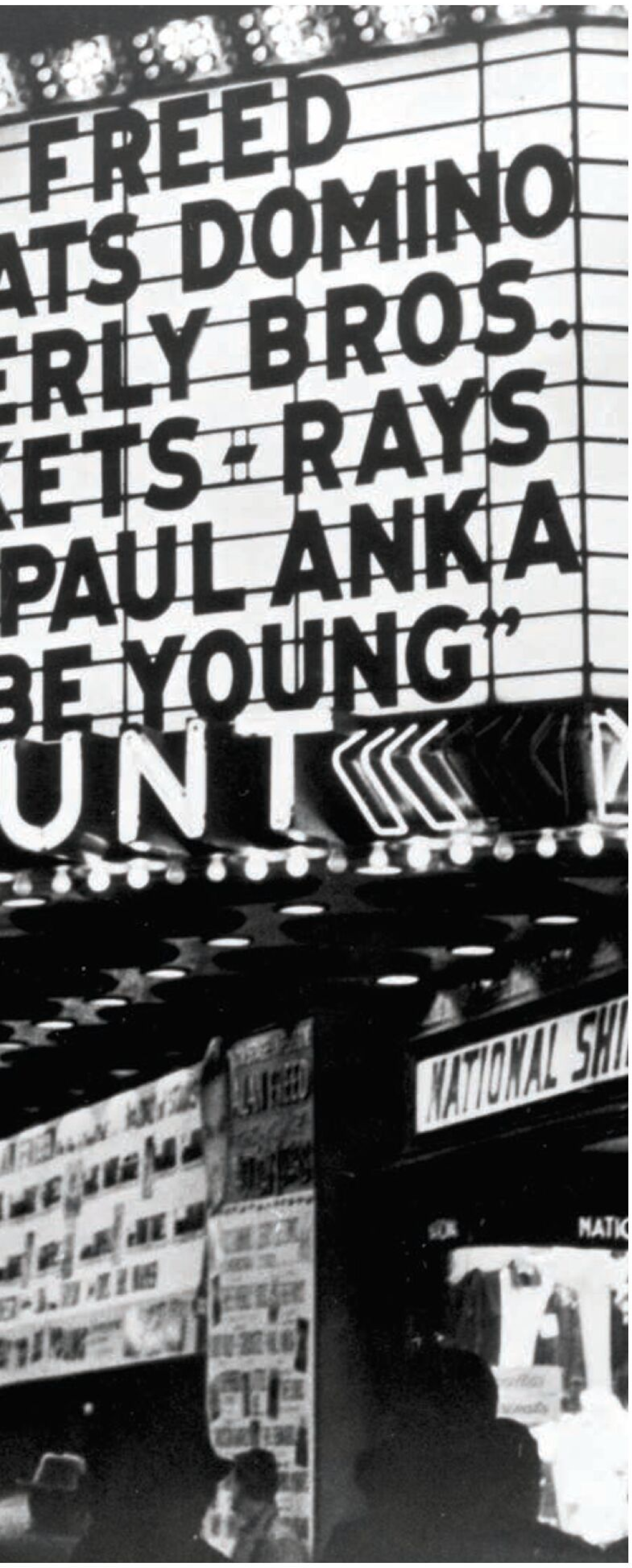
Recalling life in an unpainted shack with an outhouse and no electricity, Lewis says: "My earliest memory is listening to the Grand Ole Opry with my parents at night on the ol' battery radio. I was about four or five years old when it really got my attention."

His favourite singers were Jimmie Rodgers, the blue-yodelling 'Singing Brakeman'; Hank Williams, the haunted

Sewing Machines & Bibles

The early life of Jerry Lee

- Jerry Lee's father mortgaged his house to buy him his first piano, a used Starck upright. Dad couldn't make the payments and lost his house, but Jerry kept the piano.
- He took three lessons from a piano teacher called Mr. Griffin before deciding he preferred to play his own way.
- His first public appearance was at the opening of the Ferriday Ford car dealership. He played *Hadacol Boogie* while his father passed the hat and collected $13.
- When he was 13, Jerry was running with a football when he leapt to avoid a tackle. A bad fall cracked his hip and tore his thigh bone from his pelvis. His leg was put in a cast from the waist down and forced him to sit at the piano with his right leg jutting out to the side. When the injury healed, he continued to use that unique posture for ever more.
- His nickname, the Killer, was bestowed on him as a young teenager by his lifelong buddy Cecil Harrelson.
- In his teens, Jerry Lee briefly became Brother Lewis, a preacher at the Texas Street Assembly of God church in his home town of Ferriday. His first sermon attacked the evils of television: "You can tell when the devil's in a man's house, because you can see his tail sticking up through the roof. You know what the devil's tail looks like? A television antenna."
- Another short-lived job was selling sewing machines door-to-door for the Atlas Sewing Centre in Baton Rouge. He did a roaring trade by omitting to tell customers that the $10 down payment wasn't the only payment...
- Why didn't Jerry have to join the army, as Elvis did? Figuring they wouldn't want him if he had a criminal record, he had Cecil fill in his registration form for him, listing raps for every crime up to and including murder.


FREED
ATS DOMINO
ERLY BROS.
KETS RAYS
PAUL ANKA
BE YOUNG"
UNT
NATIONAL SHI

country balladeer; and Al Jolson, the big-screen entertainer famed for his black-face routine. They were three of the only "four stylists" Lewis has ever acknowledged (the fourth, of course, being himself). Another hero, however, was 'Singing Cowboy' Gene Autry, with the Killer rating meeting Autry on a TV special many years later as one of his proudest moments.

Although Lewis' immediate family were poor, he had a rich uncle, Lee Calhoun, who owned the land they farmed. It was from Uncle Lee that Jerry got his middle name, and it was in Calhoun's house that he encountered his first piano, when he was eight years old. By all accounts he walked straight up to the instrument and, ➡

MEMPHIS
Recording
SERVICE

Robert Alexander/Archive Photos/Getty

The hallowed Sun Studio at Union Avenue today, with the studio's original name highlighted in neon

On 4 December 1956, Jerry Lee's first proper Sun session was interrupted by three of the label's musical giants

without any prior experience, picked out *Silent Night* on the black notes, confounding his bemused family.

Convinced of his son's burgeoning talent, Elmo mortgaged the family home to buy Jerry a used Starck upright piano, which he played from morning till night. Before long he was playing the piano around Ferriday on the back of a truck while Elmo passed the hat for spare change.

Later, when he was old enough, Jerry Lee began to hone his exuberant performance style in knock-down-drag-out joints like the Wagon Wheel and the Blue Cat Club, across the river in Natchez, Mississippi. "When I would play the parking lots and honky tonks around Natchez, and play certain songs up tempo, the crowd would react differently," he recalls. "Then I knew what they wanted, and I would play it for them. It was a great feeling when I knew I was doing what the crowd liked."

Jerry's closest pals at the time were his cousins Jimmy Swaggart and Mickey Gilley, who both grew up to become piano-playing stars – Swaggart as a scandal-ridden televangelist, and Gilley as a chart-topping country singer. Did the three tearaways foresee their future success? "I really did not know about Jimmy and Mickey," Lewis reflects. "But I knew I would. We didn't talk about it... just dreamed it." In the meantime, Lewis and Swaggart engaged in more nefarious activities, and narrowly avoided jail for breaking into stores. "Jewel'ry stores an' all," as Lewis drawled.

The other great draw in Jerry Lee's life was the church, and when he married his first wife, a preacher's daughter called Dorothy, when he was 16, Uncle Lee decided to straighten him out by sending him to the Assembly of God's Southwestern Bible Institute in Waxahachie, Texas. It was a

Sam Phillips turned on the tape, and the recording was immortalised as the Million Dollar Quartet

short education, with Jerry expelled for playing the hymn *My God Is Real* with a boogie-woogie beat.

IN 1952, WHEN Jerry Lee was 17, he and life-long buddy Cecil Harrelson headed for New Orleans to try their luck in the bars on Bourbon Street. Cecil talked the club owners into letting Jerry Lee play, and the fledgling Killer rocked the joints till dawn.

While he was in the Crescent City, Lewis visited the J&M Studio (where Fats Domino was already making hits) and used its $2 Record Your Voice service to capture his first two recordings as a personal souvenir: a cover of Lefty Frizzell's current country hit, *Don't Stay Away (Till Love Grows Cold)* and an instrumental retrospectively titled *Jerry Lee's Boogie*. Although his voice was a lot higher than it would be four years later when he recorded at Sun, his ornate piano work sounded exactly like it has ever since.

But although his style was fully formed years before he made his first official release, his path to fame was not without rejection. He was turned down with a "Don't call me, I'll call you," by country legend Slim Whitman, who auditioned him for the Shreveport-based radio programme *The Louisiana Hayride*, the Grand Ole Opry rival where Hank Williams and Elvis both got their early breaks. At an audition for RCA in Nashville, in the days when rock'n'roll was yet to become a sensation, he was told to go home and learn to play guitar instead.

It was a different story at Sun, where Sam Phillips was looking for the next Elvis – even though Jerry Lee, sporting a hillbilly goatee, looked like nobody's idea of the next Elvis when he turned up for an audition, claiming to play piano like Chet Atkins played guitar. "He looked like a drifter," says Jimmy Van Eaton, who was on the cusp of becoming the house drummer at Sun, and would play on all Lewis' recordings there. "I didn't think he was going to be worth our effort. But once I saw what a great singer and fabulous piano player he was, I looked forward to anything we were gonna do with him."

When Jerry and his father paid their first visit to Sun Studios in September 1956 – having first collected 30 dozen eggs from the family hens to sell them to a Ferriday store to raise the petrol money – they were disappointed to find Sam Phillips out of town. Jack Clement, the producer who supervised the audition, was disappointed that Jerry Lee played only country tunes. He told him to go home and come back with a rock'n'roll song.

Unsure whether he was just being given another brush-off, Jerry was in two minds about returning, but was encouraged to do so by his older cousin, JW Brown, an aspiring electric bass player who lived in Memphis and dreamed of quitting work as a lineman for an electric company and joining Jerry Lee in a band.

WHEN JERRY AND JW returned to the little studio at 706 Union Avenue, it was in possession of one of the few songs Lewis had ever written, a driving rocker with a fatalistic lyric called *End Of The Road*. With the inexperienced Brown sitting out the session, Clement had Jerry record *End Of The Road* with Van Eaton on drums and Roland Janes on guitar, plus a cover of *Crazy Arms,* written by Ralph Mooney and Charles Seals. The song had been a recent smash for Ray Price, but Jerry Lee's inimitable piano playing, augmented by Sun's distinctive slapback echo, turned it into something completely different – a brand new sound in country music. According to legend, when Phillips played the tape, he only had to hear the piano intro before proclaiming, "I can sell that!"

The rush-released *Crazy Arms*, backed with *End Of The Road* and attributed to 'Jerry Lee Lewis and His Pumping Piano' didn't make the charts, but was a popular hit in the South.

While Jerry Lee searched for a follow-up, he earned his living playing piano on the records of other Sun artists, including Hayden Thompson (the rockabilly collector's item *Love My Baby*) and Johnny Cash (*Straight A's In Love*). Perhaps his most striking session work was for Billy Lee Riley, contributing a driving piano rhythm on *Flyin' Saucers Rock'n'roll*, and shouting out the backing vocal cries of "Your girl ain't doodly-squat!" on *Red Hot*.

His first official session, with Carl Perkins, on 4 December 1956, proved to be the most celebrated, however, because Elvis chose that day to revisit his old stomping ground. "It was always excitement at Sun," Lewis states. "You never knew who would drop by."

Johnny Cash was also present in the studio that day – for an iconic photo opportunity, if not for the whole of the ensuing jam session – when Presley, Lewis and Perkins gathered around the piano to sing some of the gospel songs they'd grown up with, plus some popular hits of the day. Phillips turned on the tape machine and the resulting recording was immortalised as the Million Dollar Quartet.

➡

Musical Influences

Blues, country and beyond

Jerry Lee Lewis has always insisted that his "God-given talent" arrived fully-formed. As unique and beyond comparison as his sound is, however, it was undoubtedly shaped by the music he grew up with in the post-war South.

As a child, he heard the cream of blues singers, from BB King down, at Haney's Big House, a nightclub on Fourth Street in Ferriday's black neighbourhood. "It's where I got my juice," said the singer, who would listen to the music from outside, too young and white to go in.

A major inspiration was Hank Williams, the honky-tonking 'Father Of Country Music', who Jerry Lee heard on the radio and to whose catalogue he would return time and time again. The B-side of *Great Balls Of Fire* was Hank's *You Win Again*, and the song became a life-long staple of his concerts. He also scored Billboard hits with Hank's *Cold, Cold Heart* and *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry.*

His father's favourite singer was Jimmie Rodgers, the yodelling 'Singing Brakeman', and Jerry grew up listening to his dad's 78rpm records, later turning in probably the best-ever cover of a Rodgers song, *Waitin' For A Train.*

Lewis Sr. also brought home a copy of Freddie Slack's piano boogie *5* that Jerry would cut in later years. Another record that echoes through his playing is *Pinetop's Boogie Woogie* by Clarence 'Pinetop' Smith.

Another influence was a lesser-known figure from closer to home – Jerry Lee's elder cousin Carl McVoy, a construction worker by day and pianist at night. The son of a travelling preacher, McVoy was exposed to boogie woogie pianists on a trip to New York and showed some of the licks to Jerry during a stay in Ferriday.

"He was a genius," Lewis told his biographer Rick Bragg a lifetime later. "I said: 'Boy, if I could do what he's doin', that'd be something else.'"

Jerry Lee Lewis
Maurice Seymour
Chicago

This publicity photo with Jerry Lee in his most appealing light was shot at the famous Maurice Seymour studio in Chicago

© Getty

The famous photo shows Elvis at the ivories but towards the end of the session, the superstar admitted, “I think the wrong man’s been sitting here,” to which Jerry Lee could only say “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Scoot over!” Finally at the keys, he played the session out with *Crazy Arms* and *End Of The Road*.

WHILE HE WAS living in Memphis, Lewis lodged at JW’s house where he met and fell in love with Brown’s not-quite-teenage daughter, Myra, never realising that their tentative relationship was a ticking time bomb beneath a career he had not even yet built. Before that controversy came to a head, however, Jerry Lee recorded hundreds of songs at Sun – more than many artists record in their whole career. The material covered every base, from contemporary rockers (Chuck Berry’s *Johnny B. Goode*) to country weepers (*Born To Lose*) as well as standards such as *Goodnight Irene* and instrumentals including *Dixie* and *The Marines’ Hymn* that had zero relevance to the rock’n’roll fame he was supposed to be chasing.

Most weren’t released at the time and were never intended to be, although they proved to be a treasure trove when Charly and Bear Family began releasing comprehensive box sets of his work in the 1970s and 80s. For every potential single that he worked on diligently, cutting take after take of the same song, there were a dozen others that he tossed off for fun, or warming up, but still rendered just as perfectly.

“He always thought he was the best, and he would try to prove it to you,” Van Eaton says of Lewis’ tireless eclecticism. “We did *Don’t Be Cruel* and *Jailhouse Rock* and all those songs just because he wanted to show me he could do them as well as Elvis.”

Clement and Phillips recorded everything, and it was their policy of ‘try anything and tape everything’ that produced Jerry Lee’s breakthrough hit. “I first heard *Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On* in the beer joints around Natchez,” says Lewis, who taught the song to Brown and Van Eaton during a Memphis gig. “I’d never heard it before,” Van Eaton recalls. “So we started playing it, just by ear. The dance floor started filling up and then a little bit later they’d come up and say, ‘Play that *Shakin’* song again.’ We probably played it three or four times that night and every time we played it, the floor would fill up with people.”

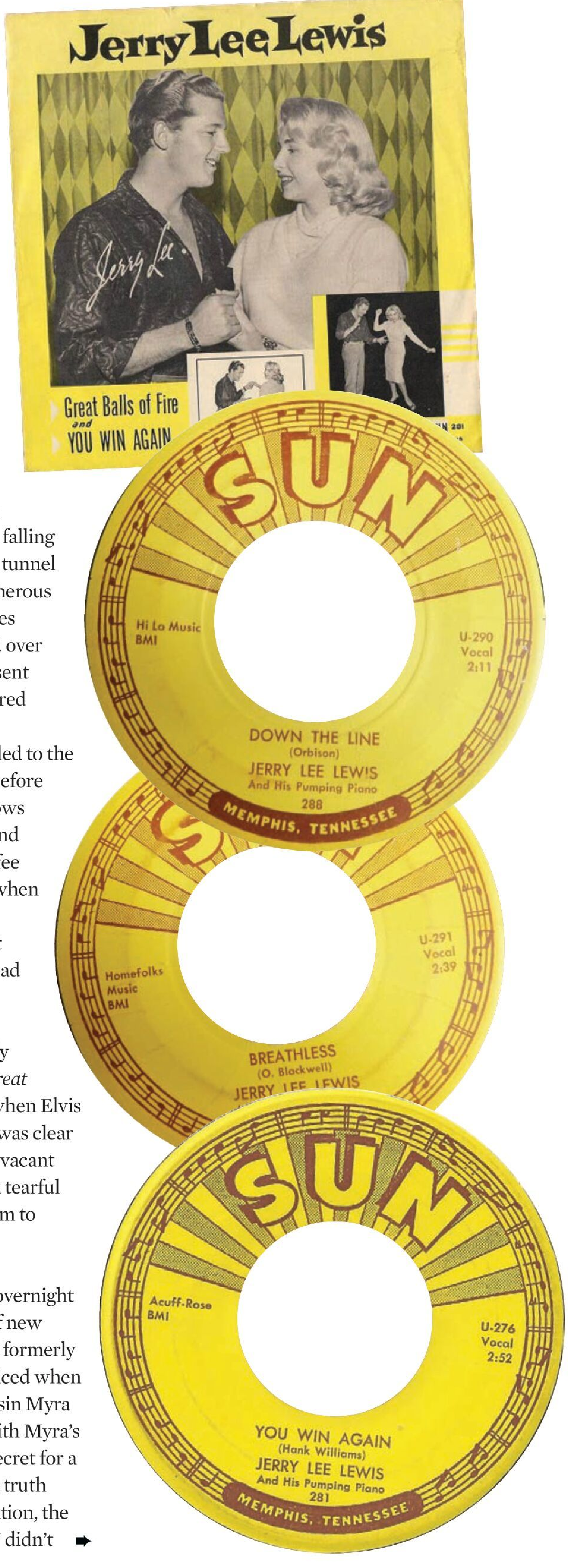
A week later, Jerry was working on an original Jack Clement song called *It’ll Be Me* and the band was growing stale. To give themselves a break, someone suggested they run through *Whole Lotta Shakin’* – and in a single unplanned take, one of the greatest tracks in rock history was in the can.

Beyond musical classification, the wall of pounding sound that was *Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On* rose simultaneously up the pop, country and R&B charts in the summer of ’57, eventually topping all three lists. It took off particularly strongly after Lewis made his incendiary TV debut on *The Steve Allen Show*, blond curls falling over his face, mouth gaping like a tunnel and eyes rolling as if in a fit of lecherous abandon. He hammered the ivories like a maniac and when he kicked over his stool and stood up to play, he sent a shockwave through an unprepared viewing nation.

Jerry Lee was suddenly propelled to the top tier of rock’n’roll, appearing before screaming hordes on package shows with Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers. His concert fee escalated to $10,000 a night and when Phillips gave him his first royalty cheque, it had so many zeros on it that the barely-schooled pianist had to ask JW if it said $4000. It was actually $40,000.

He followed up with the equally successful custom-written hits *Great Balls Of Fire* and *Breathless*, and when Elvis was conscripted into the army, it was clear who was about to take the King’s vacant throne. Jerry Lee, in fact, recalls a tearful Presley visiting Sun and telling him to “Take it. Take it all.”

AMID ALL THE excitement of overnight fame and fortune, the purchase of new Cadillacs and a new house for his formerly impoverished family, nobody noticed when Jerry Lee and his 13-year-old cousin Myra slipped out to elope. Still living with Myra’s parents, they kept the marriage secret for a week. But if the emergence of the truth caused the Browns any consternation, the matter was quickly forgotten. JW didn’t ➡



Jerry Lee’s piano and Sun’s slapback echo turned *End Of The Road* into a brand new sound for country music

Jerry Lee was propelled to the top tier of rock'n'roll, appearing with Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly

SUN
BMI
Vocal
U-229
CRAZY ARMS
(Seals-R. Mooney)
JERRY LEE LEWIS
SUN
Marlyn Music
BMI
U-247
Vocal
WHOLE LOT OF SHAKIN' GOING ON
(D. Williams-S. David)
JERRY LEE LEWIS
267
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE
Lois Music
BMI
U-337
Vocal
2:06
I'LL SAIL MY SHIP ALONE
SUN
Progressive
BMI
U-429
Vocal
2:25
WHAT'D I SAY
(Charles)
JERRY LEE LEWIS
And His Pumping Piano
356
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

miss a gig as Jerry's bassist. Marrying young, in fact, wasn't at all uncommon in Lewis' neck of the woods. His sister Frankie Jean wed at the age of 12, and as Myra helpfully told the press at the time, "Back home, you can marry at 10 if you can find a husband."

"Jerry came from one of the most socially and economically depressed and educationally backward places in the United States," explains Sun promotions woman Barbara Barnes Sims. "A lot of his family married young, and he hadn't been around enough different types of people to realise it wasn't the norm." Indeed, the couple's love proved true. The marriage lasted 13 years, until 1970, and for decades after that Myra would be Lewis' greatest defender when asked about their union.

In Memphis, Myra's age raised eyebrows but went largely unremarked upon. Sam Phillips doubted the wider world would be quite so accepting, and advised Jerry Lee not to take his new bride on his forthcoming British tour in May 1958. By that point, however, Jerry Lee was too big a star to be told what to do.

At a press conference in London, a sharp-eyed reporter noticed two young girls standing off to the side – Myra and Frankie Jean. He asked them who they were and, the next day, news of Jerry Lee's 'child bride' was all over Britain's front pages. Questions were asked in Parliament and audiences turned hostile, yelling "Cradle snatcher!" and "Sissy!" at him.

After just three shows the whole tour was cancelled.

Jerry expected the furore to be confined to Britain but the scandal crossed the Atlantic quicker than he did and was waiting for him back home. His current single, *High School Confidential*, was pulled from the airwaves and stalled outside the Top 20. Top-rated TV shows like *American Bandstand* no longer wanted to book him. His concert price plummeted from $10,000 to $250. "That's a hell of a come down," as he observed, looking back.

SUN'S ATTEMPT AT damage limitation was ill-judged. The company released a novelty single, *The Return Of Jerry Lee*, that tried to laugh off the debacle. The record featured a reporter supposedly meeting Lewis on his return to Memphis. "Where did you meet your charming wife?" asks the reporter, to which Jerry Lee 'answers' with a clip from one of his songs: "Boppin' at the high school hop!" "How did you manage to get your marriage licence with your wife being so young?" the hack continues. "I told her to lie!" answers Jerry. Shamefully, the excellent autobiographical *Lewis Boogie* was wasted on the flipside of a single no self-respecting DJ would ever spin. The Charlie Rich-penned follow-up, *Break Up*, with the line: "Don't break up with me," sounded like a plea to DJs not to abandon him, but at the height of his infamy it reached only No.52.

The popular story is that the backlash against Jerry's marriage destroyed his career for the next decade, until he returned to the spotlight as a country singer in 1968. The truth is much more nuanced. Although his fortunes took a devastating hit, he retained a strong enough grassroots following – particularly in the South – that he could return to making a decent living on the road within a relatively short time. Even an airplay ban wasn't as inflexible as it was perceived to be.

Three years after the scandal, Lewis returned to the Top 10 in Britain, the land of his downfall, with his exhilarating revival of Ray Charles' *What'd I Say*. The song also hit No.30 in America, suggesting that the poor performance of his other singles during the period can't be blamed entirely on a boycott.

What'd I Say broke through because it was an electrifying record. Other releases such as *I'll Sail My Ship Alone, Baby Baby Bye Bye* and *John Henry* are less compelling, although his unfairly ignored cover of *Little Queenie* is, like all Lewis readings of Chuck Berry songs, a humdinger. "His songs are rock'n'roll all the way," said the singer. "They're easy for me to cut."

At the dawn of the 1960s, however, changing musical tastes saw the raw rock'n'roll of the late 50s chased off the airwaves by the smoother teen pop of Bobby Vee and Bobby Vinton ("Nothing but Bobbies!" as the Killer remarked).

Sam Phillips, meanwhile, was losing interest in Sun as most of his roster moved on to other labels and he focused on other interests including radio stations and a new studio designed more for hire than his own productions. Trapped by his contract, Jerry Lee stayed with the slowing setting Sun until September 1963, when fresh pastures finally beckoned. ✶

© Getty

Posing for the British press outside the Westbury Hotel in Mayfair, 26 May 1958

20 ESSENTIAL tracks 1955-1959

Our playlist of the most rocking and groundbreaking sides from the business end of the 1950s

WORDS BY **RIK FLYNN**

The first half of the decade sprung into life thanks to the sizzling rhythm and blues that leapt from the juke joints to blow up the airwaves, alongside a handful of prototype rockers waxed by artists toying with a new sound. The second half was to elicit a revolution: a sea change in mainstream culture spearheaded by those fresh-faced upstarts who'd been tuning in and making plans to recast the magic as something entirely their own.

It was a time when it felt like anything could happen. Bill Haley's explosive *Rock Around The Clock* outgrew its B-side status to become a teenage anthem with the help of rebel flick *Blackboard Jungle*. Elvis departed Sun for the major leagues, inspiring rockabilly heroes both male and female to spring up throughout the States – and in the UK. On every street corner doo-wop ensembles lined up to harmonise their wares, with the lucky ones reaching superstar status, while the world experienced what *Rolling Stone* dubbed "the invention of the girl group" with The Shirelles pioneering *I Met Him On A Sunday*... Meanwhile, veteran star Fats Domino effortlessly outlasted all of his peers to remain the giant of rhythm and blues.

This playlist is just a snapshot, as to distil the livelier half of rock'n'roll's imperial decade into just 20 tracks would be plain daft. So many incredible musical moments are notable by their absence here, from sides such as Link Wray's seminal *Rumble* and Dale Hawkins' rockin' riot, *Susie Q*, through to James Brown's stunning *Please, Please, Please*, The Platters' soaring doo-wop *Only You* – and even such hidden delights as Elizabeth Cotten's finger-plucked gem, *Freight Train*... (we advise you listen). While we draw the line at Purple People Eaters and it goes without saying that Elvis could almost do the whole job alone, there's plenty more that deserve recognition during this period be it Sam Cooke, Johnny Horton, Ricky Nelson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Frankie Lymon, The Collins Kids, Muddy Waters, Nina Simone and on and on. The long list was, frankly, an endless one.

It was a five-year stint that birthed timeless tune after timeless tune, a musical sweet-spot in time that – for all here at *Vintage Rock* – has never been surpassed. As Shirley & Lee's celebratory New Orleans 45 declared so jubilantly as the second half of the decade got underway, 'Let The Good Times Roll!'

* * *

ember
45 RPM
45 RPM
Vocal Group
IN THE STILL OF THE NITE
THE FIVE SATINS
E-1005

20

In The Still Of The Nite

The Five Satins

(Ember, 1956)

Written by lead vocalist Fred Parris, this haunting doo-wop was laid down in a makeshift studio in the basement of the Saint Bernadette Church in New Haven, Connecticut (where fans will find a plaque). It was altar boy Vinnie Mazzetta who fixed the venue as well as supplying the iconic sax solo, while Parris' starlit turn is ably supported by his comrades, Ed Martin, Jim Freeman and Nat Mosley (just four Satins that day!). Marty Kugell produced the song and released it on his Standard label in 1956, before Ember took it on, helping it up to Billboard No.24 (No.3 R&B). With Parris on army duty when the single hit, the group couldn't capitalise, but their version is notable as being one of the first to use the term 'doo-wop', as well as being a hit three times: in '56, '59 and in 1960.

IMPERIAL
5407
ASCAP 2:14
Chappell & Co., Inc.
Vocal
BLUEBERRY HILL
(Lewis, Stock & Rose)
FATS DOMINO
IM-1082

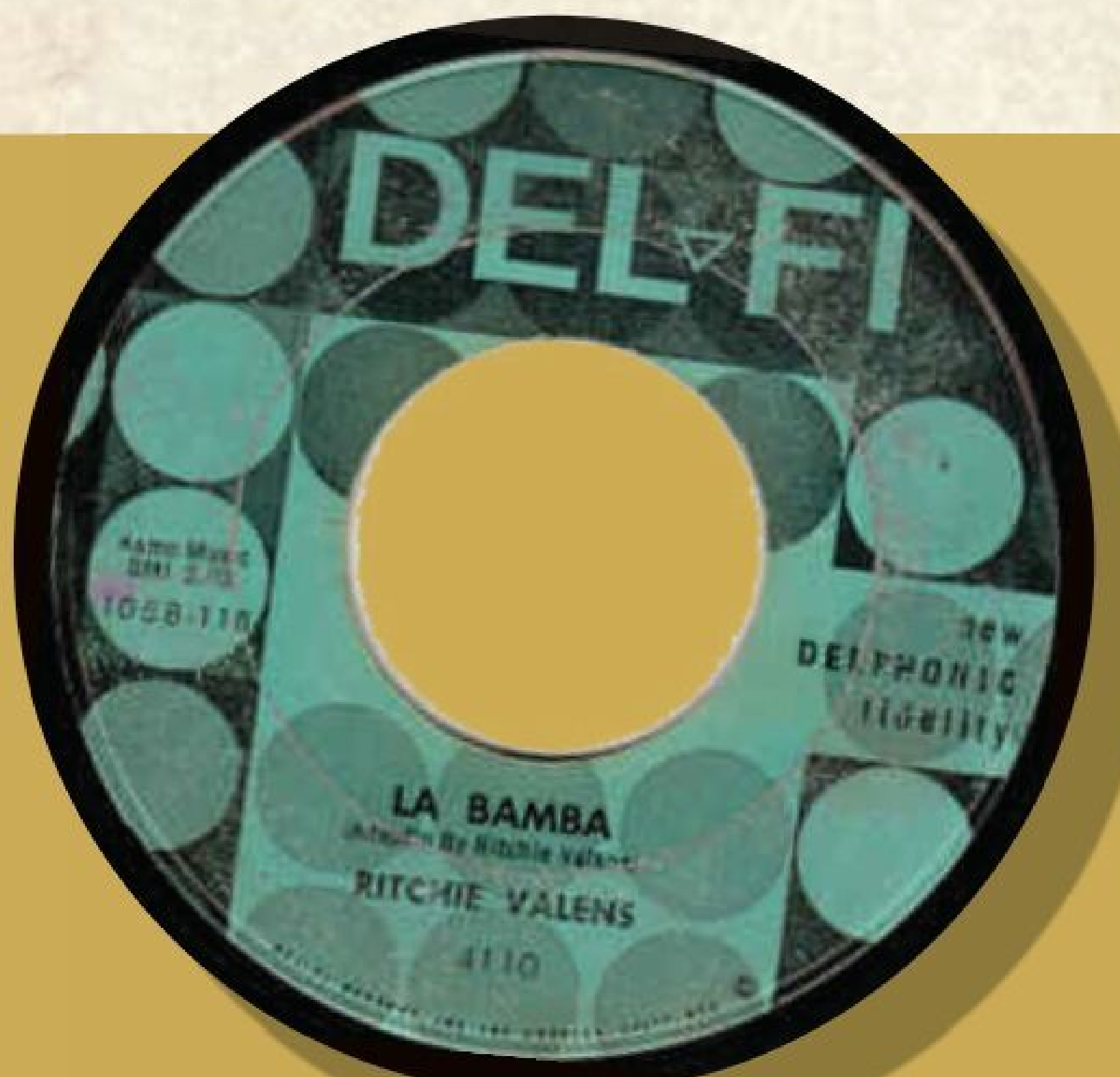
19

Blueberry Hill

Fats Domino

(Imperial, 1956)

Second only to Elvis as the top star of the decade, Fats Domino's crossover reached its peak in 1956 with *Blueberry Hill*, the biggest rockin' hit of the year – a Billboard No.2 that had sold millions by the year's close. It wasn't new. Originally written in 1940 by bandleader Vincent Rose, with lyrics penned by Larry Stock and Al Lewis, it featured in western movie *The Singing Hill*, before being a hit for the Glenn Miller Orchestra that same year (with vocals by Ray Eberle), and then again in 1949 for Louis Armstrong, Fats' favoured version. It's understandable that producer Dave Bartholomew had his reservations. Fats won the argument – and was ultimately proved right – but the session didn't go well. In fact, the final single was completed using several takes spliced together.



18

La Bamba

Ritchie Valens

(Del-Fi, 1958)

The first Hispanic rock'n'roll star, Ritchie Valens was Chicano's posterboy, before the plane crash that took his life alongside Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and their pilot. In a career that burned bright for eight short months, Valens was persuaded by manager Bob Keane to take this Mexican folk standard – itself rooted in African slavery music and the 'Bamba' tribe – and recast it as a cross-cultural firestorm, one of rock'n'roll's only non-English hits. Valens learnt the lyrics from his aunt before cutting it with LA's finest sessioneers at Gold Star studios. A-side *Donna*, a lament to his high school sweetheart, was the bigger of the two sides, but *La Bamba* also gained traction and both sides hit. Los Lobos' version made US No.1 after 1987's excellent Valens biopic.

SUN
RECORD COMPANY
Hi-Lo Music
BMI U191
Vocal
I WALK THE LINE
(J. Cash)
JOHNNY CASH
and Tennessee Two
241
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

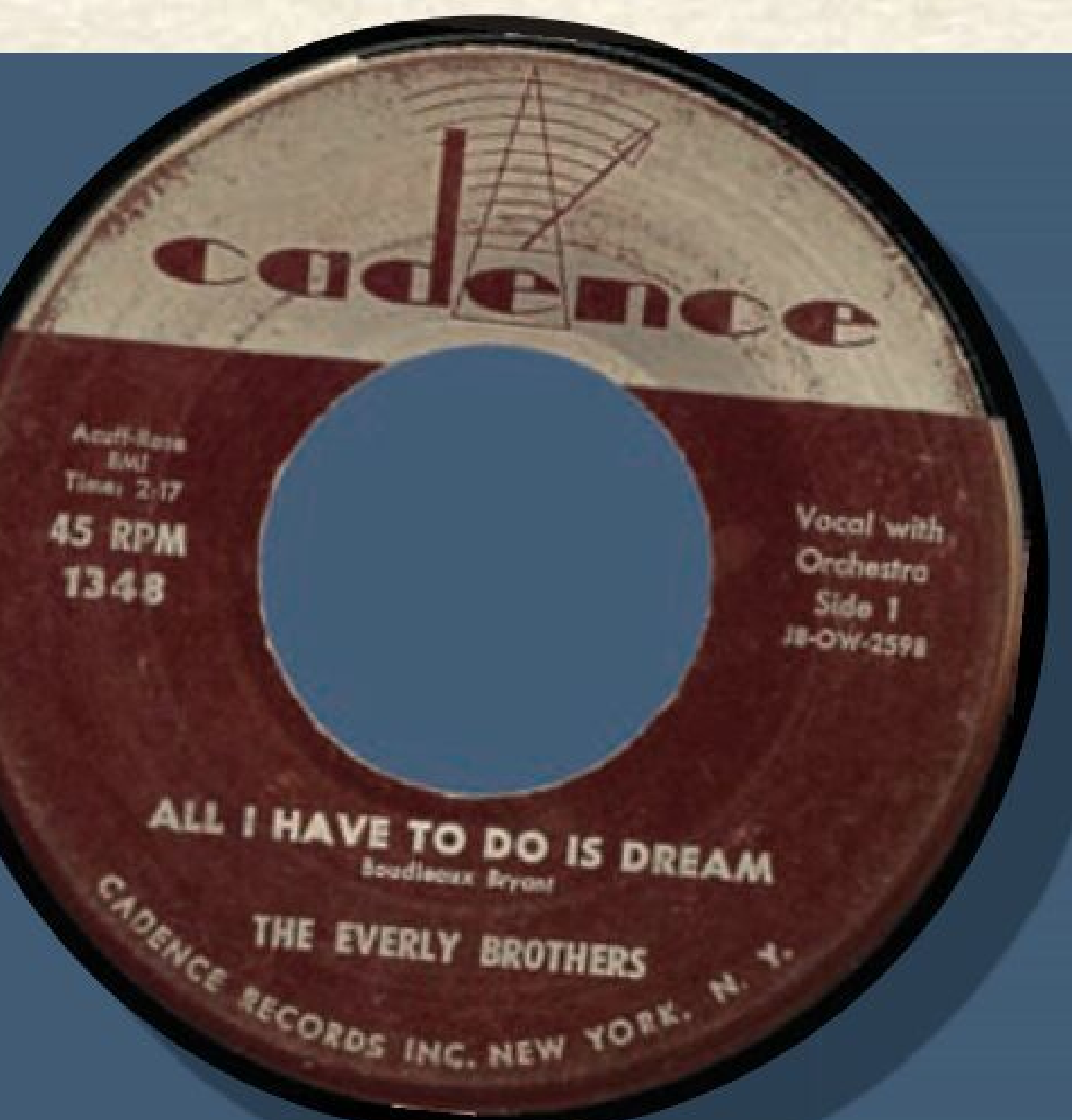
17

I Walk The Line

Johnny Cash

(Sun, 1956)

Conceived in just 20 minutes as a "pledge of devotion" fresh from walking the aisle with first wife Vivian Liberto, this gospel-tinged classic was recorded under the stewardship of Sun's Sam Phillips. Cash claimed to have gained inspiration for the lyrics from a business course, while the chords arrived having heard a tape of his first band, The Landsberg Barbarians, playing backwards that "sounded like spooky church music". He even said he'd picked up the humming idea from a doctor from his hometown. For the recording he wedged paper between his strings to coax out the sound he wanted, while Phillips upped the tempo of the "freight train" rhythm. Cash wasn't a fan, calling it "bare and stark", but as it rose up the charts he succumbed, glad for a country No.1 and a crossover hit. Two months later Cash would meet June Carter at the Grand Ole Opry…


cadence
45 RPM
1348
Vocal with Orchestra
Side 1
ALL I HAVE TO DO IS DREAM
Boudleaux Bryant
THE EVERLY BROTHERS
CADENCE RECORDS INC. NEW YORK, N. Y.

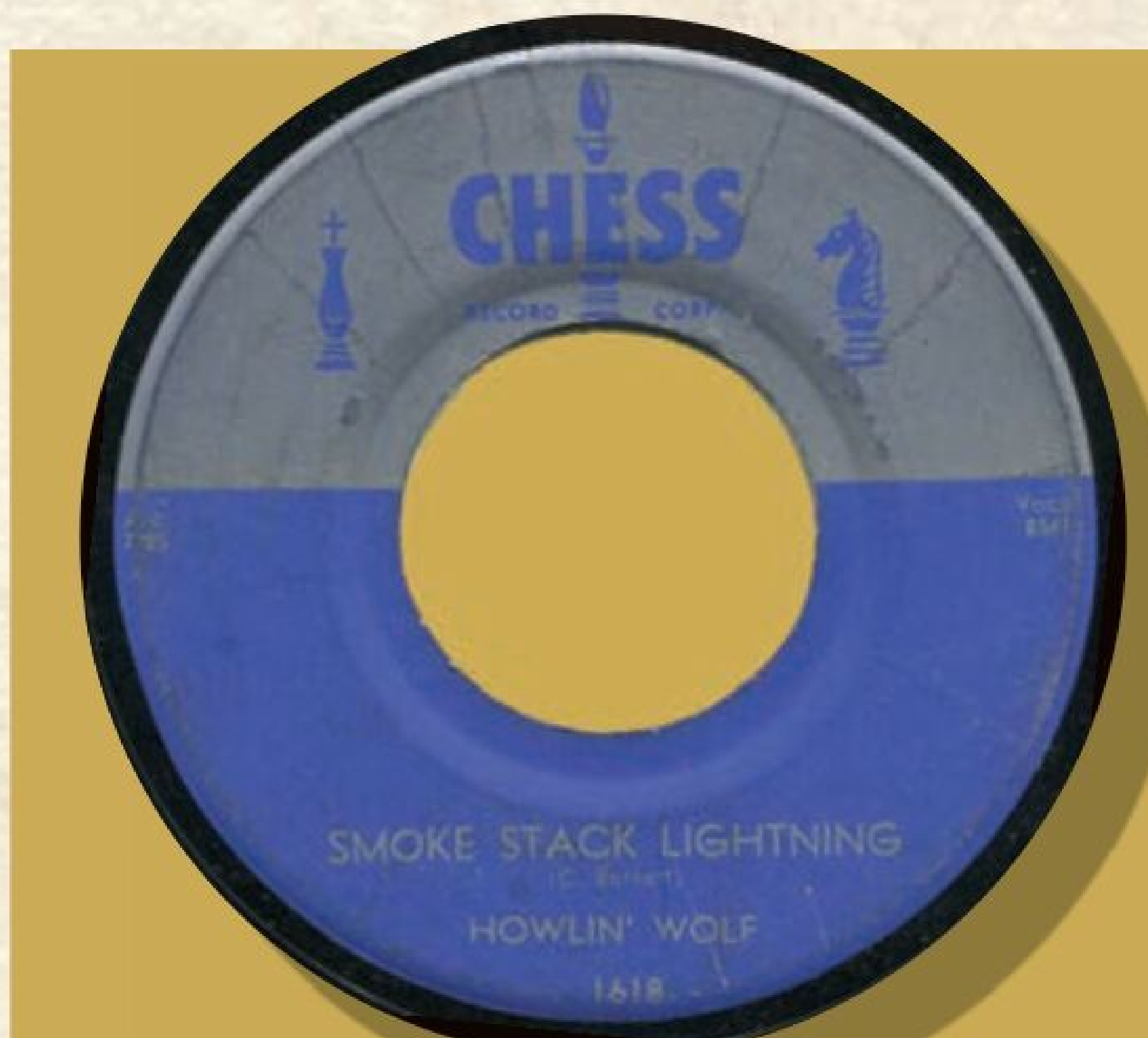
16

All I Have To Do Is Dream

The Everly Brothers

(Cadence, 1958)

Trace a line back from the Everlys and find an incredible lineage of close harmony-singing siblings, but perhaps none so indelibly written into American history as Phil and elder brother Don. And no song of theirs did more for the genre than this lilting Cadence single, a strangely joyous paean to unrequited love and a blueprint for future acts to follow, from The Beatles to Simon & Garfunkel. The track was written by Boudleaux Bryant who, with his other half Felice, gave the brothers the lion's share of their best material including *Bye Bye Love*, *Wake Up Little Susie*, *Bird Dog* and *Devoted To You*. Augmented by shivering tremolo guitar from the fingertips of Chet Atkins, the track went to No.1 on all of Billboard's charts, as well snatching the summit in the UK too. It's flipside was a suitably handsome take on Roy Orbison's *Claudette*.


CHESS
SMOKE STACK LIGHTNING
HOWLIN' WOLF
1618

15

Smoke Stack Lightning

Howlin' Wolf

(Chess, 1956)

Chicago bluesman Chester Arthur Burnett's hypnotic calling card is one of the most influential tunes in history. Within its ferocious bars, Wolf switches from gravel-voiced moans to a visceral falsetto inspired by Jimmie Rodgers and Tommy Johnson, recasting this sombre, otherworldy field holler punctuated via some feral harmonica. He's in esteemed company: guitarists Willie Johnson and Hubert Sumlin, Willie Dixon on bass, Earl Phillips on drums and Hosea Lee Kennard on piano. Taught by Delta legend Charley Patton, Wolf cut a preliminary version in '51, entitled *Crying At Daybreak*, that would evolve into this, the pinnacle of his career. The track was given classic blues status by the Blues Foundation's Blues Hall of Fame, it was honoured by the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999 and it made the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry.

14

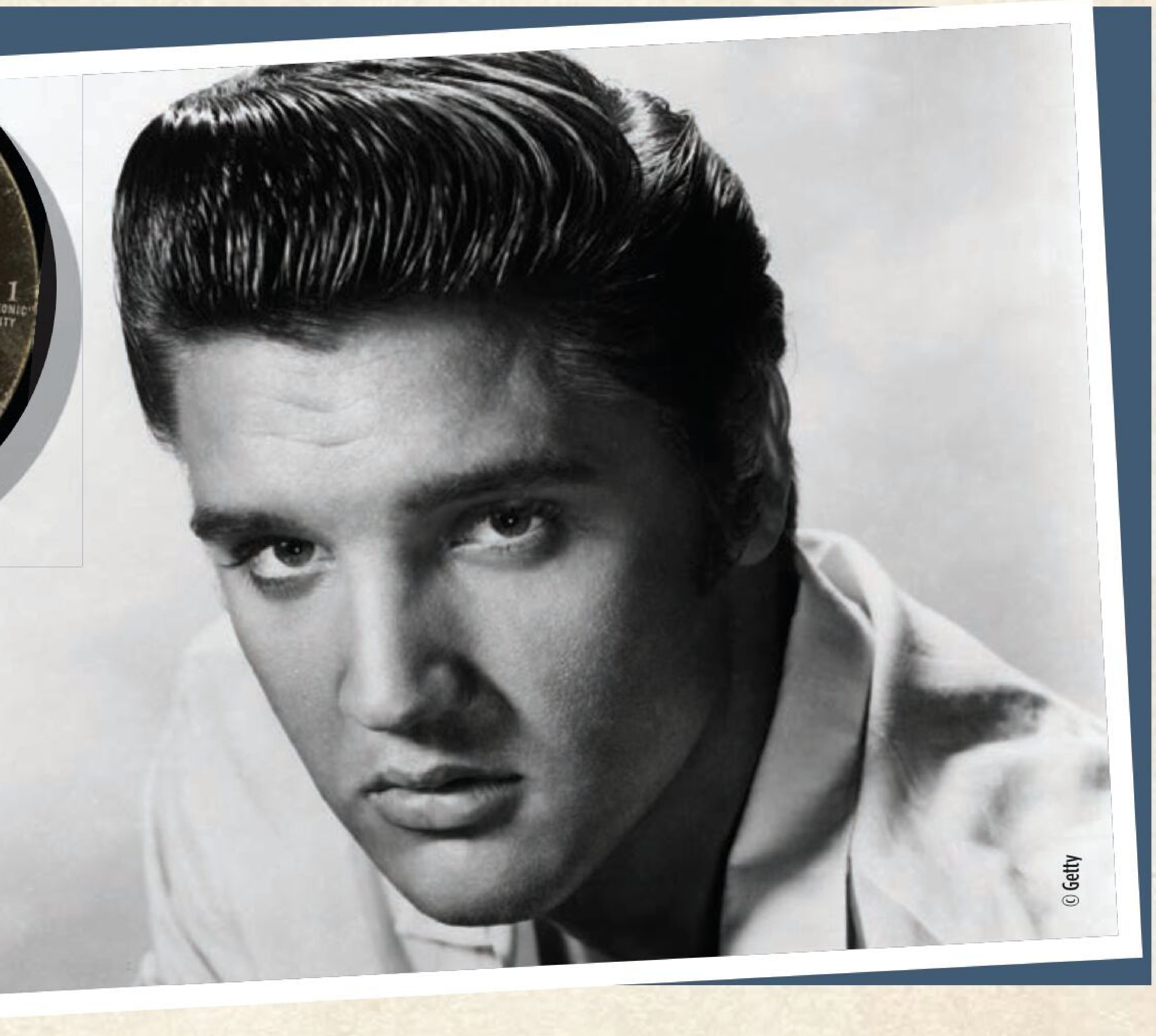
Heartbreak Hotel

Elvis Presley

(RCA, 1956)

RCA VICTOR
EPA-821
SIDE – 1
"NEW ORTHOPHONIC" HIGH FIDELITY
1. HEARTBREAK HOTEL
2. I WAS THE ONE
ELVIS PRESLEY

In the second half of the 50s Elvis put out some of his finest material, from early RCA sides to movie mega-hits, but this, his first Billboard No.1, was the moment the Hillbilly Cat morphed into a superstar. And it was with a rather morbid tune that he made the switch. Its writers, Tommy Durden and Mae Boren Axton, famously took inspiration from a newspaper article about a nameless man and his one-line suicide note: "I walk a lonely street." Nonetheless, Elvis loved it: "Hot dog, Mae, play it again!" he is said to have exclaimed on first listen. Cut in January '56, it was an eight bar blues that changed the lives of many, including John Lennon and Paul McCartney.


© Getty

LIBERTY
F-55144
SUMMERTIME BLUES
EDDIE COCHRAN
LIBERTY RECORDS INC. HOLLYWOOD, CALIF. U.S.A.

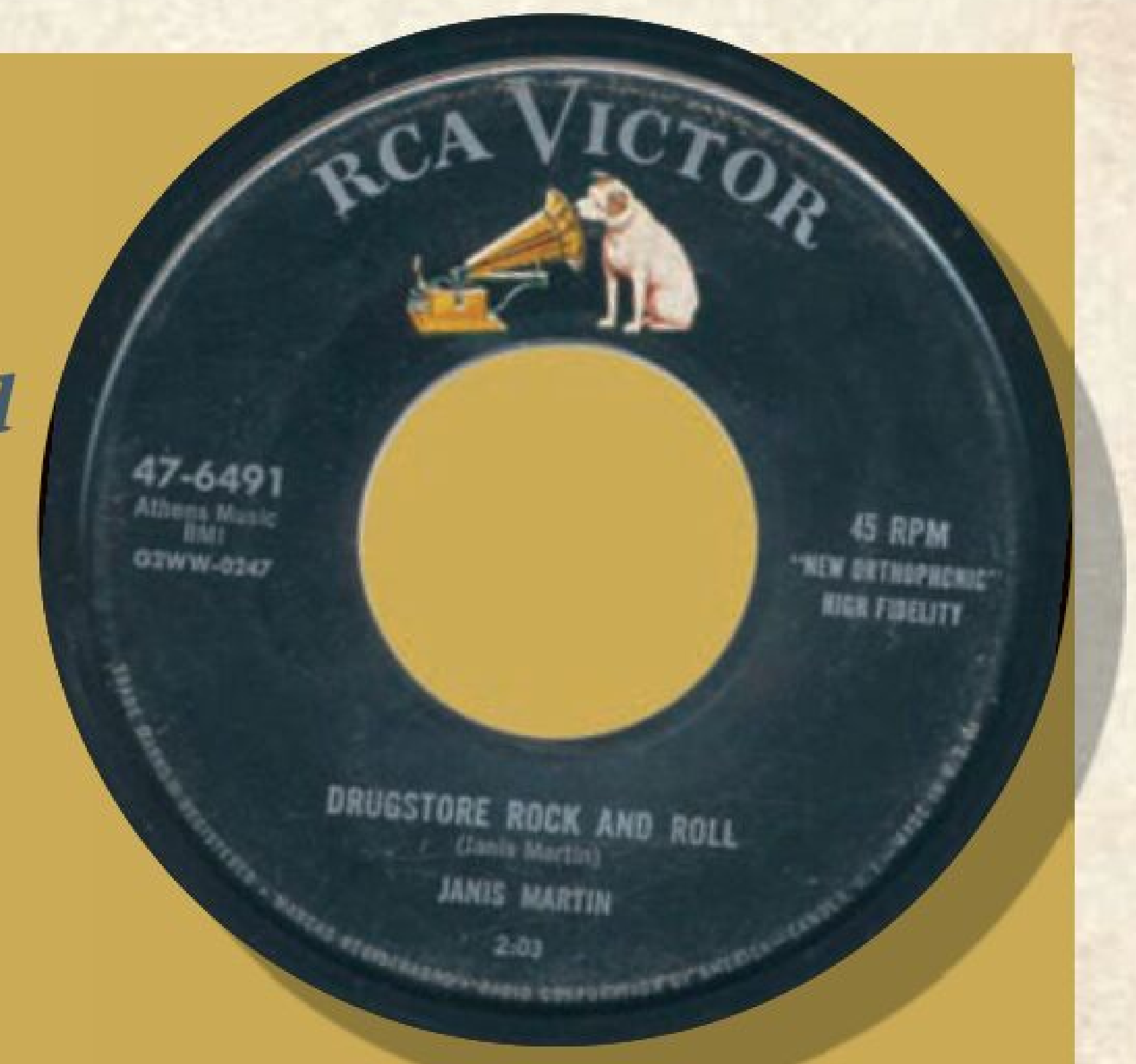
13

Summertime Blues

Eddie Cochran

(Liberty, 1958)

Post his stint as one of the (unrelated) Cochran Brothers, Eddie performed *Twenty Flight Rock* on *The Girl Can't Help It*, bagging a contract with Liberty that led to some of the best material waxed during the decade, be it *C'Mon Everybody*, *Teenage Heaven*, *Somethin' Else*, or this timeless classic. The track was penned together with manager and songwriting partner Jerry Capeheart as an exploration of the darker side of summer: "There had been a lot of songs about summer," said Jerry, "but none about the hardships of summer." With Eddie's timeless guitar lick and Capehart's lyrics, plus Eddie's imitated voice of authority borrowed from the *Amos 'n' Andy* TV show, the song gelled, and in less than an hour they'd completed one of the American songbook's finest entries.



12

Drugstore Rock And Roll

Janis Martin

(RCA, 1956)

Breaking out of the gates in a male-dominated industry, albeit branded as the 'Female Elvis', Janis Martin rocked with the best of her male peers. Just 15 years old when she cut her biggest hit – *Will You, Willyum* – for RCA, Janis was already a burgeoning songwriter having penned its much-loved flipside *Drugstore Rock And Roll* herself – a *Vintage Rock* favourite. Appearances on *American Bandstand*, Steve Allen's *Tonight* show, and on the prestigious Grand Ole Opry stage upped her standing yet further. While Martin's career came to an abrupt end when she eloped with her husband and got pregnant, still at 15, she returned to bask in past glories thanks to the rock'n'roll revival – and continued blowing audiences away and recording magic into her later years. Her final album, *The Blanco Sessions*, produced by fellow rockafilly Rosie Flores, was released posthumously in 2012.

Fujiyama mama
WANDA JACKSON
Capitol

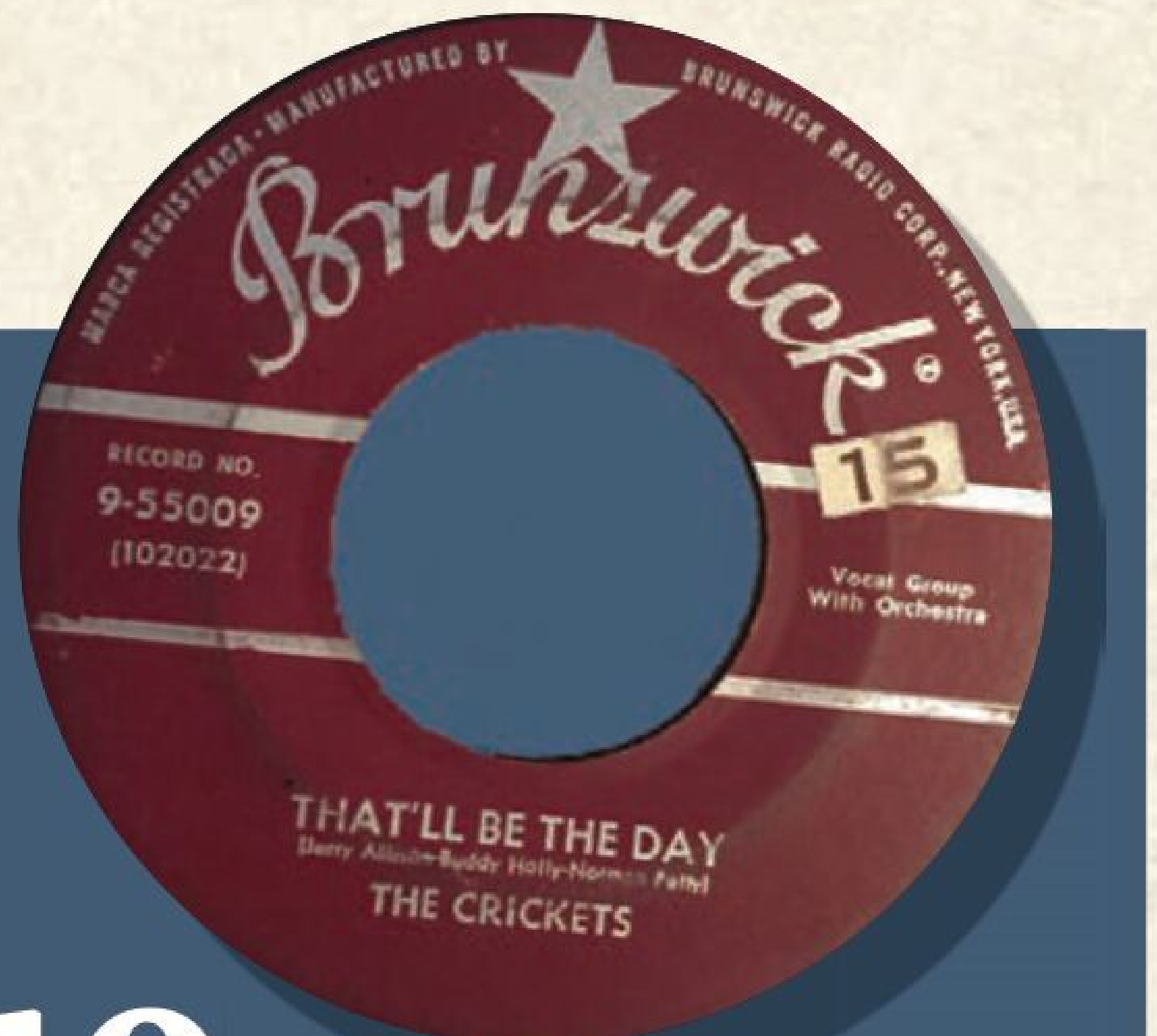
11

Fujiyama Mama

Wanda Jackson

(Capitol, 1958)

Many female rockers of the 50s remain criminally unsung in the wider world, be it Sun's Barbara Pittman, the sizzling Sparkle Moore, or Rose Maddox. They were hard times for women in the industry, meaning Wanda Jackson – one of the few who rose to serious recognition – deserves her place here far more than most. Wanda rocked national TV with her take on *Hard Headed Woman* on *Town Hall Party* to prove the point, and would hypnotise the record-buying public with the inimitable *Funnel Of Love* a few years later, but it is this explosive rockabilly side that did the business in the second half of the decade. Despite its slightly clumsy subject matter – referencing the atom bombings of 1945 – it bizarrely made No.1 in Japan in 1959. Still, her US homeland paid little attention, mostly as no one gave it airplay in times when the rock'n'roll fraternity ruled the roost. Now, it's a hicupping classic.



10

That'll Be The Day

The Crickets

(Brunswick, 1957)

Buddy was incredibly prolific considering his career was cut so tragically short, leaving a canon that includes such magic as *Peggy Sue*, *Not Fade Away* and *Oh Boy!*, but debut single *That'll Be The Day* was his bigger seller. Inspired by a John Wayne line in western *The Searchers*, this took a mere 30 minutes to write. Nonetheless, it had a rocky route to No.1. Producer Owen Bradley thought it "the worst song [he'd] ever heard" after numerous takes came to nothing, but when the band decamped to Norman Petty's studios in Clovis, New Mexico, everything clicked. With the key dropped, the band cut their infectious 'Texas Shuffle' in just two takes. Still, Buddy's new label Decca weren't convinced, issuing just 1000 copies on subsidiary Brunswick to a distinctly average reception. With regional radio picking up on it, its fortunes shifted and it finally topped the US charts in September 1957 – and deservedly so.

SUN
RECORD COMPANY
BLUE SUEDE SHOES
CARL PERKINS
234
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

9

Blue Suede Shoes

Carl Perkins

(Sun, 1956)

Quite possibly *the* most recognisable song of the decade, *Blue Suede Shoes* has resonated ever since. Tales of its provenance extend from a Johnny Cash story about a soldier in the mess hall warning the line off his shoes, to a guy on a dancefloor in Jackson hollering not to step on his suedes. Either way, Carl put it all together, scrawling lyrics on an empty potato bag at 3am one morning, before taking it to Sam Phillips at Sun who suggested the switch from 'Go, man, go!' to 'Go, cat, go!'. Acetates were doled out to DJs, it made No.1 on the Memphis listings, spread across the South, and was soon shifting 20,000 a day. Sadly for Carl, a car accident en route to the Perry Como show meant he missed the chance to be the first rockabilly on national TV. Instead, Elvis strutted his lip-curled take on the *Dorsey Brothers Stage Show*, stealing Carl's thunder, as he did when *Heartbreak Hotel* kept this off the top.

Capitol
BE-BOP-A-LULA
(Sheriff Tex Davis-Gene Vincent)
GENE VINCENT
and His Blue Caps
F3450
Vocal with Instrumental Accompaniment
(45-15230)
Lowery Enterprises
BMI-2:31

© Getty

8 *Be-Bop-A-Lula*
Gene Vincent & His Blue Caps

(Capitol, 1956)

It brimmed with sexual desire and measured hepcat cool when it stormed the charts in 1956 and gave Capitol Records' great rock'n'roll hope an immediate and rather sizeable hit. Co-written with service buddy Donald Graves (even though Gene's business manager Bill 'Sheriff Tex' Davis gets a credit), whom Gene met during his lengthy stay in hospital, this big beat classic took inspiration from Helen Humes' 1945 hit *Be-Baba-Leba* and was another of the many classics to be laid down at Owen Bradley's studio in Nashville, initially as a flipside for *Woman Love*. Favoured by DJs, it sold in the millions and had soon stationed itself in the Top 10 of the US pop chart. The dastardly 'Sheriff Tex' reportedly diddled Gene out of his stake in the track for a mere 25 bucks.

CHESS
"JOHNNY B. GOODE"
(C. Berry)
Arc Music
BMI
8633
2:30
CHUCK BERRY
1691

7
Johnny B. Goode
Chuck Berry

(Chess, 1957)

Whether it be his debut firecracker *Maybellene*, *Roll Over Beethoven*, *Rock'n'Roll Music* or any of his numerous rockin' masterstrokes, Chuck'll forever be filed under 'genius'. Still, it's no surprise that this faultless ode to the cause tops most examinations of the golden era. Not only was it the track that took him to giant status, but it was also the only rock'n'roll song to be included on the 1977 Voyager Golden Record sent out into space – which is just plain cool. A part-autobiographical tale of a rising rocker – Berry told *Rolling Stone* that the "coloured boy" of the original lyrics was changed to "country boy" to ensure airplay – this was written while on tour in New Orleans, supposedly intended for pianist Johnnie Johnson, and was produced by the Chess brothers with the stately bass of Willie Dixon.

Specialty
45
45 R.P.M.
XSP-561-45
Pub: Venice-BMI
Time: 2:25
TUTTI-FRUTTI
(La Bostrie-Penniman)
LITTLE RICHARD
And His Band

6
Tutti Frutti
Little Richard

(Specialty, 1955)

Most rock'n'roll fans have likely heard the tale behind Little Richard's signature tune: raunchy Chitlin circuit crowd-pleaser morphs into toned-down super-smash. Richard was way ahead of the curve singing about being a homosexual man in the late 50s, but it was producer Bumps Blackwell that saw the potential in the song, hammered out during a break mid-session. Bumps brought in Dorothy LaBostrie to temper the lyrics for the mainstream, which she cleverly managed without losing the original's salacious edge. Get it straight though, any one of Richard's hits fits the bill from the hair-raising thrills of *Lucille* to the pounding thrum of *Good Golly Miss Molly*. Self-proclaimed as the Innovator, the Originator, the Emancipator, the Architect… the irreplaceable Little Richard was the wildest and most colourful of the breed.

Brunswick
9-55024
REET PETITE
(The Finest Girl You Ever Want To Meet)
JACKIE WILSON

5
Reet Petite
Jackie Wilson

(Brunswick, 1957)

Detroit's vocal phenomenon Jackie Wilson closed out a four-year stint fronting doo-wop megastars The Dominoes to go solo with this hooky confection of R&B and pop, written by Berry Gordy, Berry's sister Gwen and her boyfriend, songsmith Billy Davis. Taking its title from bandleader Louis Jordan's song *Reet, Petite, And Gone*, that had appeared in an all-black musical film of the same name in which he also starred, Wilson cut the song at New York's Pythian Temple with the city's session elite. For arranger Dick Jacobs, Wilson sounded "like honey on moonbeams" and yet the single only crawled in at a paltry No.62 on the Billboard. Still, it provided the funds for Gordy to launch Motown, and has since become a classic. Re-issued in 1986, with a clay animation video, it finally reached UK No.1.

COLUMBIA
MOVE IT

4

Move It
Cliff Richard & The Drifters

(Columbia, 1958)

Cliff left rock'n'roll behind soon after but, nonetheless, his debut 45 was the first UK classic of the genre and one of the first rock'n'roll singles released outside the US. The track was conceived by guitarist Ian Samwell while on a bus, having seen a *Melody Maker* cover that suggested rock'n'roll was dead. Producer Norrie Paramor helmed the Abbey Road session (sporting Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts), but engineer Malcolm Addey took the reins, with Ernie Shears (guitar) and Frank Clarke (bass) brought in to iron out the creases. Cut in the final hour, this was originally a B-side to his cover of Bobby Helms' *Schoolboy Crush*, but was promoted when Jack Good requested Cliff perform it on his TV show *Oh Boy!* Said Norrie: "History was made when Cliff made his first record, *Move It*." A UK No.2.

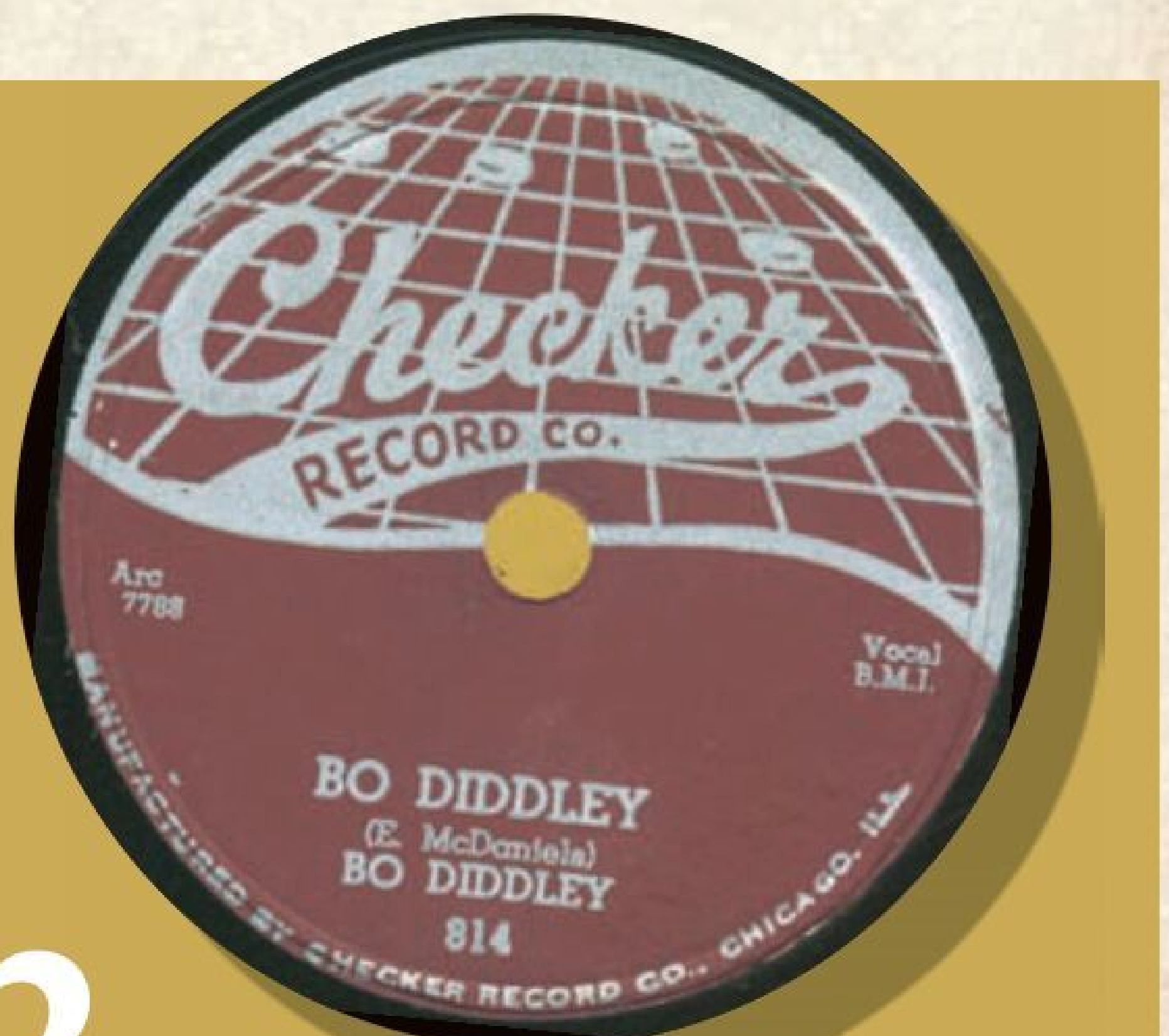
Jerry Lee Lewis
Great Balls of Fire
and
YOU WIN AGAIN
SUN 281

3

Great Balls Of Fire
Jerry Lee Lewis

(Sun, 1957)

Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On boisterously announced Jerry Lee's arrival on the scene, but it was *Great Balls Of Fire* that cemented his genius. Penned by Elvis' go-to songsmith Otis Blackwell with Jack Hammer, Jerry Lee struggled with the subject matter, as heard on the studio tapes: "You got to walk and talk with God to go to heaven," implores a conflicted Jerry to Sam Phillips. "How can the devil save souls? I got the devil in me!" Lewis was a God-fearing guy and here was Sam persuading him to inhabit a feral tune with a thinly veiled lyric about sex. It's something that still concerns him to this day. Cut with drummer Larry Linn and bassist Sidney Stokes, and issued in November 1957, this rollicking missive sold over a million within days of release and was featured in 1957 movie *Jamboree*. It reached Billboard No.2.



2

Bo Diddley
Bo Diddley

(Checker, 1955)

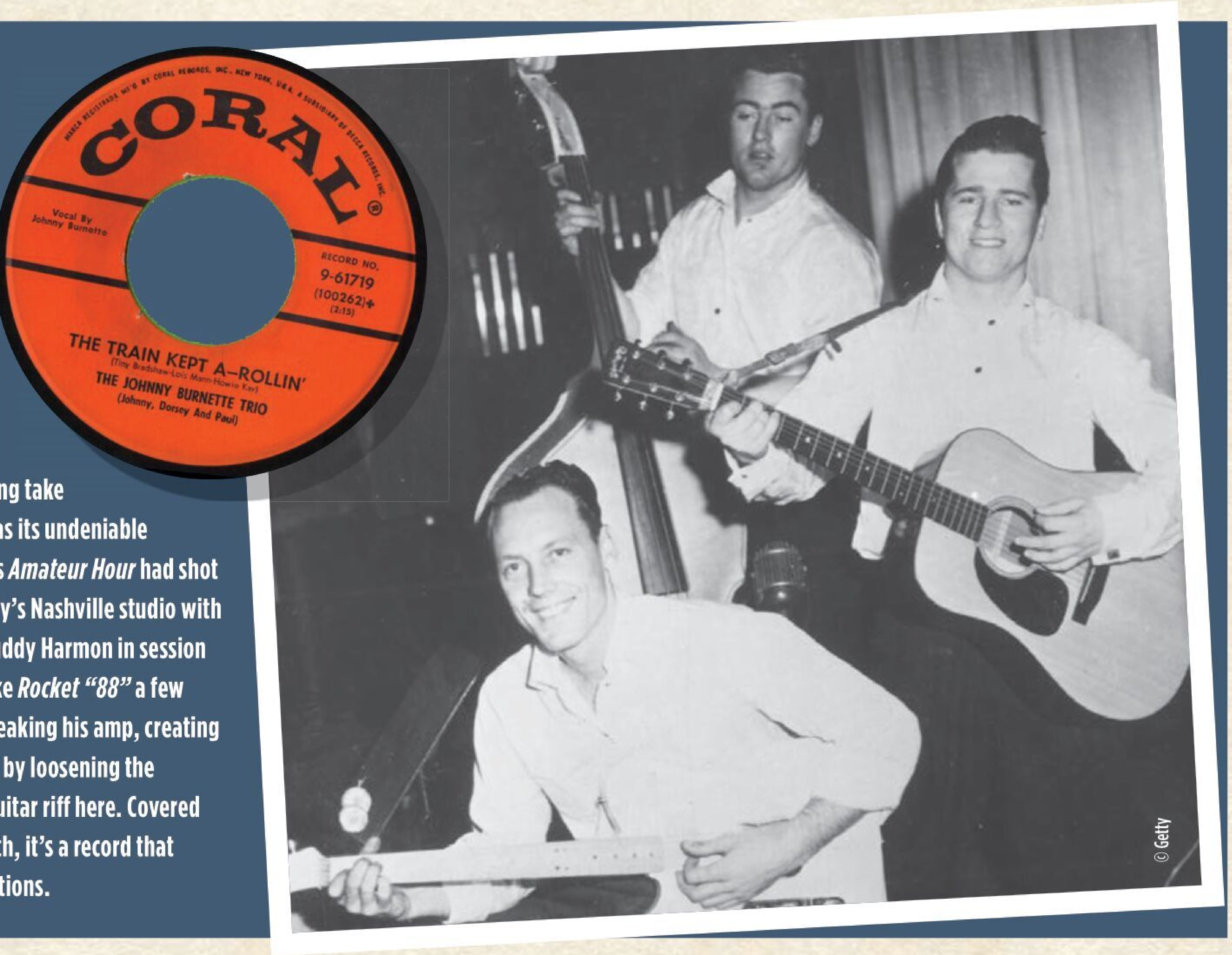
One of the first big waxings of the period, this eruptive 45 was given body and shape thanks to its unique 'Bo Diddley Beat', a hypnotic blend of African slapping rhythm, the hambone (first heard by Bo at Pentecostal church services as a child), lyrics inspired by lullaby *Hush Little Baby*, and the twang of his six-string. Bo cut this at his very first studio session and immediately grabbed R&B No.1: his indelible image of thick-rimmed black specs, grappling his self-built oblong red guitar – The Twang Machine – is as synonymous with rock'n'roll as any other. "I opened the door for a lot of people, and they just ran through and left me holding the knob," he told the *New York Times*. Even credited as the 'Grandaddy of Hip Hop', Bo's beat has been much-aped ever since, by everyone from Buddy Holly to U2 and on…

1

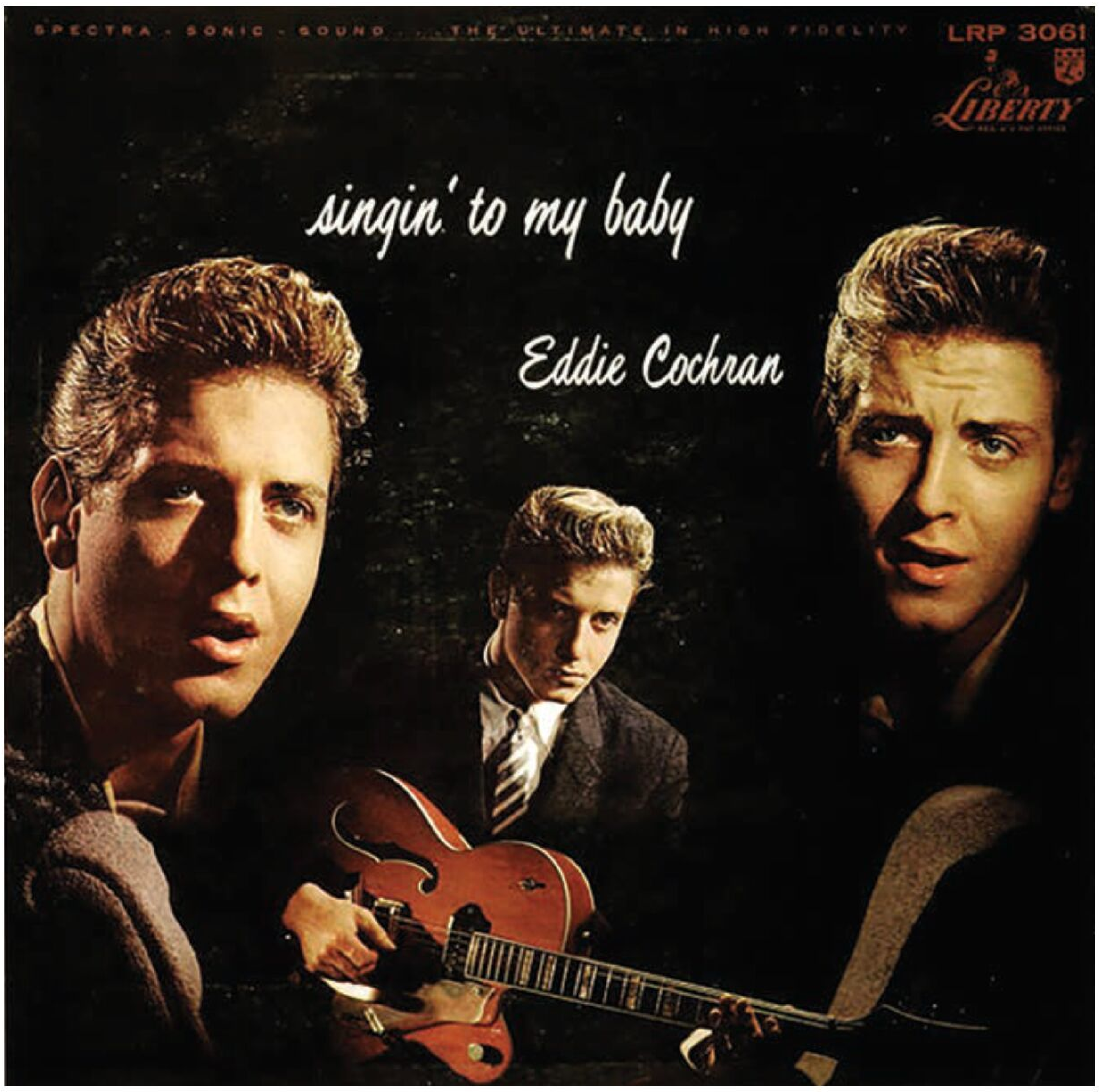
The Train Kept A-Rollin
The Johnny Burnette Trio

(Coral, 1956)

Memphis siblings and would-be pugilists Johnny and Dorsey Burnette and their pal Paul Burlison grew up as neighbours to a young Elvis and stirred up an equally addictive rockabilly storm with their plenty punchy self-titled album in 1956. A smouldering take on Tiny Bradshaw's *The Train Kept A Rollin'* was its undeniable centrepiece. Three wins in a row on Ted Mack's *Amateur Hour* had shot the trio skyward, before a trip to Owen Bradley's Nashville studio with A-list guitarist Grady Martin and sticksman Buddy Harmon in session ensured the lightning translated to record. Like *Rocket "88"* a few years earlier, this benefitted from Burlison breaking his amp, creating a fuzz effect that he would purposely recreate by loosening the tubes to turn up the heat on his two-octave guitar riff here. Covered by everyone from Shakin' Stevens to Aerosmith, it's a record that continues to shake the walls down the generations.


CORAL
Vocal By Johnny Burnette
RECORD NO. 9-61719 (100262) (2:15)
THE TRAIN KEPT A-ROLLIN'
(Tiny Bradshaw-Lois Mann-Howie Kay)
THE JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO
(Johnny, Dorsey And Paul)

© Getty


SPECTRA - SONIC - SOUND ... THE ULTIMATE IN HIGH FIDELITY
LRP 3061
Liberty
singin' to my baby
Eddie Cochran

SINGIN' TO MY BABY

Critics haven't always been kind to *Singin' To My Baby* but while the only album released in Eddie Cochran's lifetime lacks the songs that established him as one of the all-time greats, it's still an underrated gem...

WORDS BY **JACK WATKINS**

© Getty

In the early years after his death, Eddie Cochran fans got used to compilations of his best-known songs. Just five months after his fatal accident in the UK, *The Eddie Cochran Memorial Album* climbed to No.9 in the British LP charts. Reissued three years later, there was still enough demand for it make No.11. It followed the success of another compilation album, *Cherished Memories*, which had charted at No.15 that year. A different sort of product was *Singin' To My Baby*, reissued several times in the 1960s, and briefly charting on a couple of occasions in this country.

First released in the States in 1957, and in the UK a few months later, *Singin' To My Baby* had been the only album to have been released in Cochran's lifetime. With its classy sleeve cover, the beautifully lit images included one of the artist holding his striking Gretsch 6120, and looking pensively into the middle distance. While a lot of people have been a bit sniffy about the choice of songs on this record over the years, it deserves better, not least because, unlike so many albums by rock'n'rollers in that period, it was not some hastily slung together assemblage of a star's big hits, but was genuinely conceived as a studio album, all the tracks laid down in sessions at Gold Star Studios in Hollywood between the early spring and summer of 1957. It is also a fascinating timepiece, reflecting the confusion and dilemma that confronted many studio bosses and performers at the time as to how to present their recorded music to the public.

COCHRAN WAS ONLY 18 when he recorded the songs for this album. As Rob Finnis wrote in his detailed essay to accompany Rockstar Records' *The Eddie Cochran Box Set*, it was "probably as unrepresentative a set" as Gene Vincent's first LP for Capitol Records, *Bluejean Bop!* which had been released the previous year.

Yet the tendency of many writers to disparage both of these albums because of the sedate nature of some of the content stems from a partial misreading of music history. A lot of rock-orientated journalists, contemptuous of the 1950s music scene, have painted the era as just a revved-up prelude to the real hard stuff that was to come from the mid-60s. But rock'n'roll did not arrive on the block fully-formed, and most of its early exponents grew up listening to pop and country crooners like Perry Como and Eddy Arnold and belters like Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray, alongside more blues-influenced country artists like Hank Williams and a string of R&B performers. They were, within reason, happy to incorporate a few standards in their recorded repertoire, and usually performed them brilliantly, as proven many times over by Elvis Presley and Vincent across their careers. The ability to sing standards at that time was proof of your artistic integrity. Cochran, fractionally younger, was alive to the changing musical climate and was inspired by Presley, but as a consummate musician first and foremost, he would have been across all the styles, even if his instinct was always to add the inflections of rock'n'roll.

Not some assemblage of the star's big hits, it was a genuine studio album

All the same, you'd have to say the British got lucky with later versions of *Singin' To My Baby*, licensed for release on the London Records label, because of the inclusion of three extra, high-quality tracks which add a little extra zip. Most notably these included *Twenty Flight Rock* which, albeit with a different arrangement, had been the song Cochran performed in the Frank Tashlin-directed satire of the music business *The Girl Can't Help It*. Despite still being hitless at the time, with only one single as a solo artist, *Skinny Jim*, released on the Crest label, behind him, Cochran is introduced in the film as one of America's "top rock'n'rollers," and his slightly mannered performance made a big impression at the time. The version of *Twenty Flight Rock* he performs in the picture was released as a single in this country to coincide with the film's arrival in British cinemas, but the version on ***Singin' To My Baby*** was a later cut. Many prefer the original with the rockabilly-style click of Connie 'Guybo' Smith's slap bass more forward in the sound mix, whereas it is hardly noticeable in the second version. But whichever version you prefer, it's still an exciting song, and the lyric about an amorous young guy with a girlfriend who inconveniently lives 20 floors up in an apartment block has helped make it become an accepted Cochran favourite.

LIBERTY
REG. U.S. PAT. OFFICE
SINGIN' TO MY BABY
EDDIE COCHRAN
with The Johnny Mann Orchestra and Chorus
Spectra-Sonic-Sound
A High Fidelity Recording
LRP 3061
CURVE RIAA
SIDE ONE
1. SITTIN' IN THE BALCONY (Johnny Dee) 1:58
2. COMPLETELY SWEET (E. Cochran-J. Capehart) 2:17
3. UNDYING LOVE (E. Cochran-J. Capehart) 2:05
4. I'M ALONE BECAUSE I LOVE YOU (Schuster-Young) 2:20
5. LOVIN' TIME (Jan Woolsey) 2:04
6. PROUD OF YOU (Fitzsimmons) 1:56
LONG PLAYING 33⅓ RPM MICROGROOVE
LIBERTY
REG. U.S. PAT. OFFICE
SINGIN' TO MY BABY
EDDIE COCHRAN
with The Johnny Mann Orchestra and Chorus
Spectra-Sonic-Sound
A High Fidelity Recording
LRP 3061
CURVE RIAA
SIDE TWO
1. MEAN WHEN I'M MAD (E. Cochran-J. Capehart) 1:50
2. STOCKINGS AND SHOES (Lyle Gaston) 2:09
3. TELL ME WHY 2:15
4. HAVE I TOLD YOU LATELY THAT I LOVE YOU (Mac. Wiseman) 2:22
5. CRADLE BABY (Terry Fell) 1:45
6. ONE KISS (Eddie Cochran) 1:48
LONG PLAYING 33⅓ RPM MICROGROOVE
MFG. BY CENTURY RECORD MFG., BURBANK, CALIF., U.S.A.

TRACK LISTING

SIDE 1

Sittin' In The Balcony
Completely Sweet
Undying Love
I'm Alone Because I Love You
Lovin' Time
Proud Of You

SIDE 2

Mean When I'm Mad
Stockings And Shoes
Tell Me Why
Have I Told You Lately That I Love You
Cradle Baby
One Kiss

However, *Twenty Flight Rock* is not reflective of the overall sound with which Liberty were clearly keen to use to present Cochran at this time, more as a romantic teen lover than as a horny young dude. So the first pressing of the album in 1957 kicks off with ***Sittin' In The Balcony***. Instead of putting out ***Twenty Flight Rock*** to capitalise on the impact of Cochran's film appearance, this was the song Liberty boss Si Waronker had chosen to release as his first single. It was a cover of a song by a young singer Johnny Dee (better known to us as John D. Loudermilk) which Waronker had tried to secure the distribution rights for. In failing to do so, he got Cochran to record a note-for-note remake, complete with metallic guitar break, and heavy use of echo, including for a big smoochy kiss at the end. They laboured

© Getty

Singin' To My Baby **was the only album Eddie Cochran released during his short lifetime**

long over getting the sound right, however, and were rewarded when it outsold the Dee original, reaching No.18 to give Cochran his first Top 20 hit early in 1957, though it didn't enjoy the same success in Britain.

Kissin' Cochran must have had some traction, because *Singin' To My Baby*'s closer *One Kiss*, a Cochran-Jerry Capehart collaboration, had been the follow-up single. It's a none-too-subtle retreading of similar ground to *Sittin' In The Balcony*, with some more twangy guitar on the bridge. The driving mid-paced rocker *Mean When I'm Mad*, recorded at the same session, was the flip on the poor-selling single, and featured more good guitar work, and an aggressive Cochran vocal performance.

Cochran digs deep. Incredibly, let's not forget, he was still only a teenager

ONE OF THE most interesting tracks on the album was *Completely Sweet*. The instrumentation on the *Singin' To My Baby* album was always sparse, led by Cochran on guitar. Long-time friend and musical associate 'Guybo' Smith was at this stage still playing stand-up bass on Cochran's recording sessions, rather than the electric bass he would switch to on later hits like *Summertime Blues* and *C'mon Everybody*. The veteran sideman Perry Botkin Sr., who'd worked with everyone from Al Jolson, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope to Spike Jones, was on rhythm guitar, and on tracks without Jerry Capehart's box-tapping contributions, there was an unspecified drummer. Then there were the Johnny Mann Singers, a vocal group who were at Liberty under a separate contract. Backing vocal groups have got a bad name over the years. Indiscriminately used on so many 50s and early-60s records to the point of cliché, they sweetened and softened the edges of many songs, but the Mann Singers were more skilfully deployed on Cochran's recordings.

Completely Sweet, transformed from a more basic earlier Cochran effort at this song which he had penned with Capeheart, is a striking example of the value of the Mann Singers. The vocals add depth to a track that also features one of the mid-song rhythmic shifts Cochran often favoured, in this case from a rhumba rhythm to a shuffle and back again, before closing out with a guitar and slap-bass coda, and Cochran dropping his voice into bass mode to sing, "She's so completely sweet."

Cradle Baby, written by country singer Terry Fell, whose real gift was for songwriting, followed the same stylistic model as *Completely Sweet*, with another short, sweet killer guitar break, great backing vocals and cleverly layered, syncopated rhythm. *Stockings And Shoes* was another good song, keeping up the energy levels with good call-and-response

© Getty

interplay between Cochran and the Mann Singers, but the same could not be said for the Cochran-Capehart composition *Undying Love*, which was just plodding, while *Tell Me Why*, which had an embarrassing spoken passage, was even worse. To be fair, while it is usually listed as having been penned by Cochran, he doesn't bear the responsibility for this mournful dirge, which was actually a cover of an earlier song by ballad singer Betty Johnson, *Please Tell Me Why*, first released the previous year.

Eddie
COCHRAN
THE YEAR
1957

THE YEAR 1957

BEAR FAMILY RECORDS' RELEASE IS A MUST-HAVE FOR EDDIE OBSESSIVES

Singin' To My Baby was released in the autumn of 1957. Bear Family Records' *Eddie Cochran: The Year 1957* traces the period. An essay from *Vintage Rock*'s Bill Dahl points out that while Cochran probably got signed by Liberty Records because the company saw him as their answer to Elvis, he had several innate talents that even Presley could not match, already being a prolific songwriter, a great lead guitarist and "a natural in the recording studio."

While *Singin' To My Baby* was recorded under the auspices of Liberty boss Si Waronker, the label knew enough to allow Cochran some leeway when it came to the sound of his records. The gritty sense of rhythmic depth on album tracks like *Cradle Baby* and *Completely Sweet* surely came from Cochran. It would not be until the following year, and the likes of *Nervous Breakdown*, *Summertime Blues* and *C'Mon Everybody*, that Cochran's studio creativity, including his interest in building sound layer by layer would fully bear fruit, but the signs are there in some of his 1957 work.

The Year 1957 also features several interviews by the singer, and some live performances of *Sittin' In The Balcony*, *Twenty Flight Rock* and *Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On*. In interviews Cochran cut an amiable personality. Had he lived he would surely have become a great spokesperson for rock'n'roll at a time when the music really needed articulate advocates.

PROUD OF YOU was a mildly swinging little ditty, with Cochran extolling the delights of his girl over a liberal dose of doo-wahs from the Johnny Mann Singers. One of the main curiosities of this song is that it was written by Dale Fitzsimmons, who'd previously joint-penned with Ray Stanley *Latch On* – one of the best songs Eddie and his unrelated namesake Hank Cochran recorded together during their formative earlier partnership as The Cochran Brothers. *Lovin' Time* had Cochran strumming a ukulele, and qualifies as a pleasant enough filler.

There were two traditional ballads on *Singin' To My Baby*. There's no doubt that Cochran generally struggled to sound convincing on outright slowies, *I'm Alone Because I Love You* being a case in point. Much better was *Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?*, however, which Cochran would almost certainly have heard being sung by Presley on his recent RCA album, *Loving You*. This sentimental song, written by Scotty Wiseman, has been performed by many country singers over the years, including Gene Autry and Jim Reeves, whose maturity made them better placed to deliver the lyric with conviction, yet Cochran digs deep to produce a solid new version. Incredibly, let's not forget, he was still only a teenager, and *Singin' To My Baby* remains a monument to a talent who, at 18, had already passed the precocious stage. ✶

CLASSIC ALBUM

CHESS LP 1426
high-fidelity
After
School
Session
With
Chuck
Berry

Chuck Berry
AFTER SCHOOL SESSION

"The songs are all original compositions written by Chuck, for Chuck, and as only Chuck can perform them," read the sleevenotes. Jack Watkins analyses one of the great albums of the late-50s...

In the summer of 1955, Chess, a label specialising in selling R&B and blues to black record-buyers, released a new single by a still-unknown Chuck Berry. *Maybellene* had been recorded at the Chicago company's South Side studios a couple of months earlier, but boss Leonard Chess had left it in the can, afraid its release might spoil sales of two other Chess singles which were doing well on the R&B charts – Bo Diddley's *I'm A Man* and Muddy Waters' *Mannish Boy*.

When they did get round to putting out the disc, after the urgings of New York DJ Alan Freed, it proved an instant smash, with its sales surpassing anything the label had previously achieved. *Maybellene* not only made No.1 on the R&B chart, it spent 16 weeks on the pop chart, peaking at No.5, giving the label its breakout from the black-only sales market into that of the more lucrative white teens.

Over the following months Chess would release a steady stream of Berry singles, including *Thirty Days*, *Roll Over Beethoven* and *School Day (Ring! Ring! Goes The Bell)*. However, they didn't exactly rush to cash in on the album market. Berry's first effort *After School Session* did not come out until May 1957, the sleevenotes hailing him as "Rock-a-Billy Troubadour".

In reality, in the days when the money was in singles not long players, Berry hadn't gone into the studios to 'cut an album' in the modern sense. The 12 tracks were lifted from the tapes of six sessions spread out between May 1955 and January 1957 – and some buyers at the time may have been disappointed at the omission of *Maybellene* and *Roll Over Beethoven*, and the fact that it included only three real rockers, *School Day*, *Too Much Monkey Business* and *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*.

Yet Berry was never, in his own mind at least, just the swaggering, duck-walking, guitar-toting pioneer of straight-down-the-middle rock'n'roll that some painted him as being. John Lennon once said that if you'd tried to give rock'n'roll a name, you might have called it Chuck Berry, and that, musically speaking "before Elvis, there was nothing", but Chuck knew better. When he walked into the studios and hitched

➨

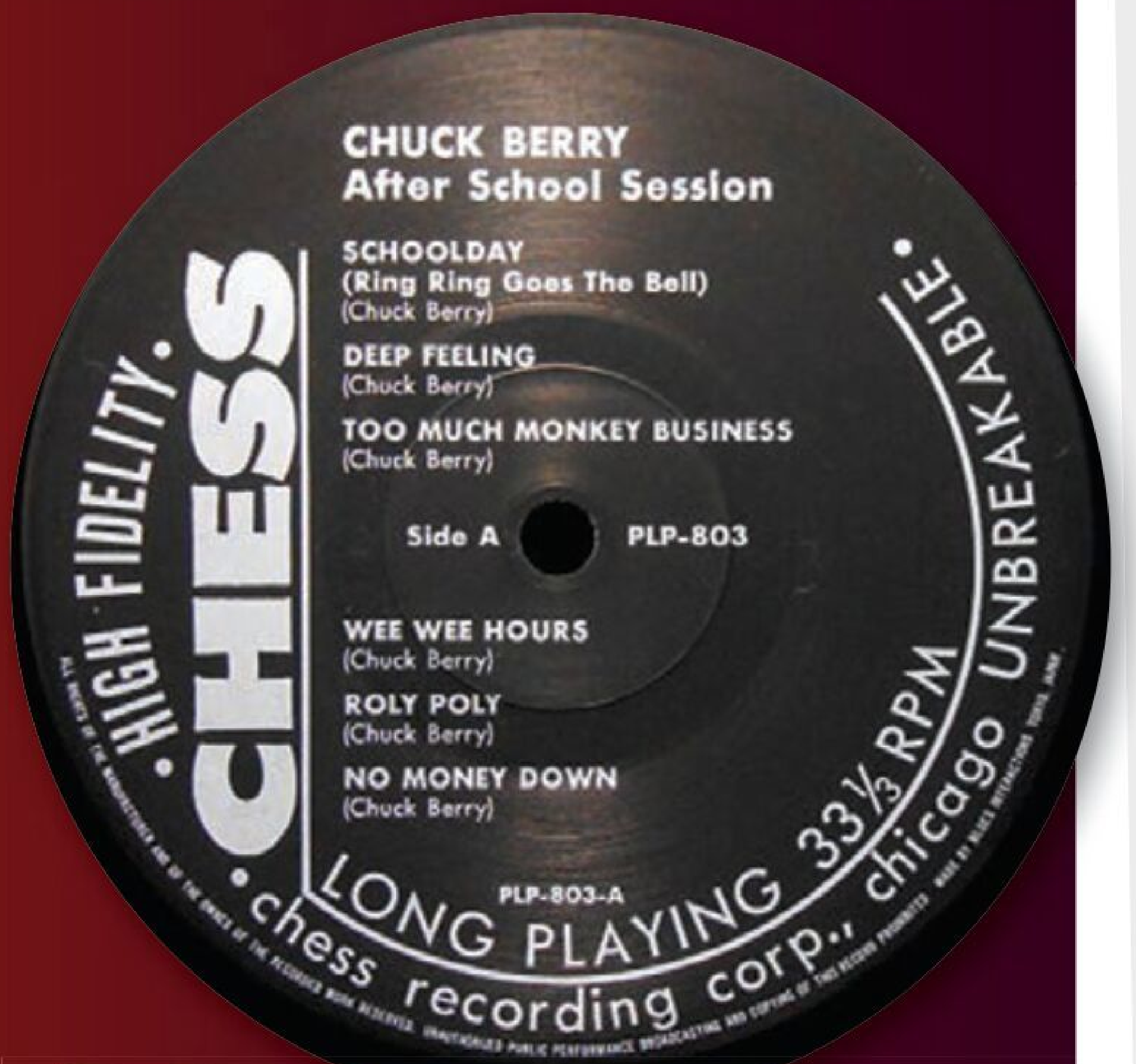
© Alamy

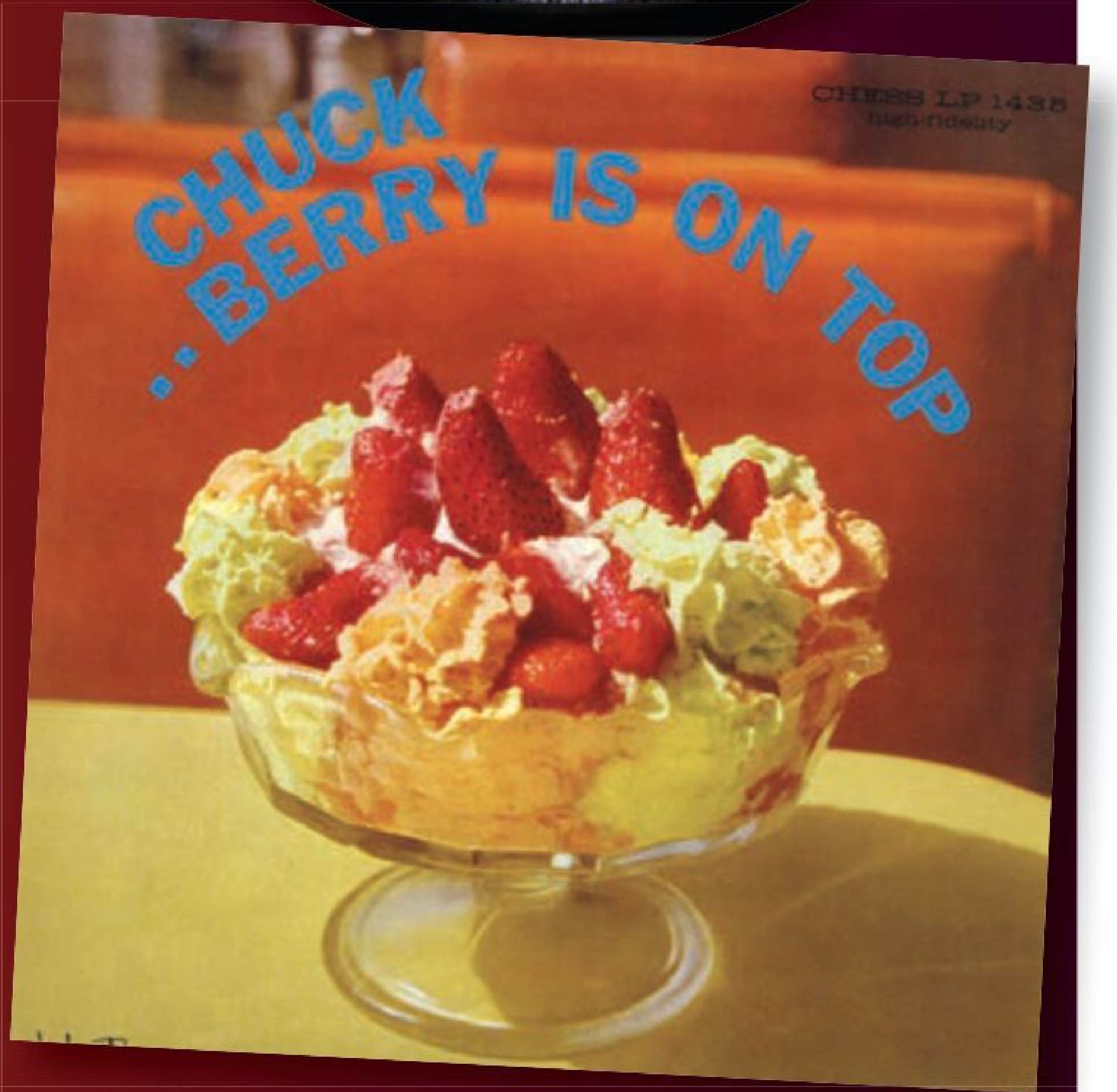
Berry in playful mood for a portrait session, circa 1958

LISTEN UP!

Rock'n'roll obsessives would have to wait until July 1959 for the first outright rocking LP from our man: *Berry Is On Top*, featuring gems like *Carol*, *Johnny B. Goode*, *Little Queenie*, *Almost Grown*, *Sweet Little Rock and Roller*, *Maybellene* and *Roll Over Beethoven*.

Berry Is On Top and *After School Session* – along with Berry's other first Chess albums, *One Dozen Berrys*, *Rockin' At The Hops* and *New Juke Box Hits* – were all memorably re-released on strikingly coloured vinyl, with up-to-date sleevenotes, on Easy Action's Vipvop label. See more at www.easyaction.co.uk


CHUCK BERRY
After School Session
SCHOOLDAY (Ring Ring Goes The Bell) (Chuck Berry)
DEEP FEELING (Chuck Berry)
TOO MUCH MONKEY BUSINESS (Chuck Berry)
Side A
PLP-803
WEE WEE HOURS (Chuck Berry)
ROLY POLY (Chuck Berry)
NO MONEY DOWN (Chuck Berry)
PLP-803-A
HIGH FIDELITY
CHESS
LONG PLAYING 33⅓ RPM
UNBREAKABLE
chess recording corp., chicago


CHUCK BERRY IS ON TOP
CHESS LP 1435
high fidelity

CHESS LP 1448
high fidelity
CHUCK BERRY
rockin' at the hops

Chuck swaps his usual Gibson for a Kay Thin Twin electric on stage, circa 1956

the strap of his Gibson ES-350T over his shoulder to record *School Day* in 1957, he was already 30 and effectively from a different generation to the likes of Presley, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis and Eddie Cochran, all at least nine years younger. He knew that raucous, uptempo music didn't just begin when Elvis, Scotty Moore and Bill Black walked into the Sun Studios in 1954.

Born in 1926, Berry had grown up in a respectable neighbourhood of St Louis, Missouri, listening to swing-era giants like Lionel Hampton and Tommy Dorsey. His guitar heroes were sophisticated jazz operators like Charlie Christian, who played in both Benny Goodman's big band and his bop-pioneering sextet, and Carl Hogan, a member of Louis Jordan's Tympany Five. As far as Berry was concerned, as he told *Goldmine* in 1983, Jordan "was playin' it [rock] long before me, Fats, any of us."

He also loved the songs of hillbilly performers like Kitty Wells, and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, and admired the pioneer of electric blues, T-Bone Walker. When he made his first professional performance as a member of boogie pianist Johnnie Johnson's Sir John's Combo at the Cosmopolitan Club in East St Louis in 1952, he recalled he was playing more "blues than rock". He even hankered to be a crooner in the style of Nat King Cole. What Berry, unlike his more stilted heroes, appreciated was the visual side of music, and that youngsters wanted "some gettin' down, and some wigglin'," as he put it – but *After School Session* with its stylistic diversity might well be the album he'd personally chosen as reflecting his rich musical heritage.

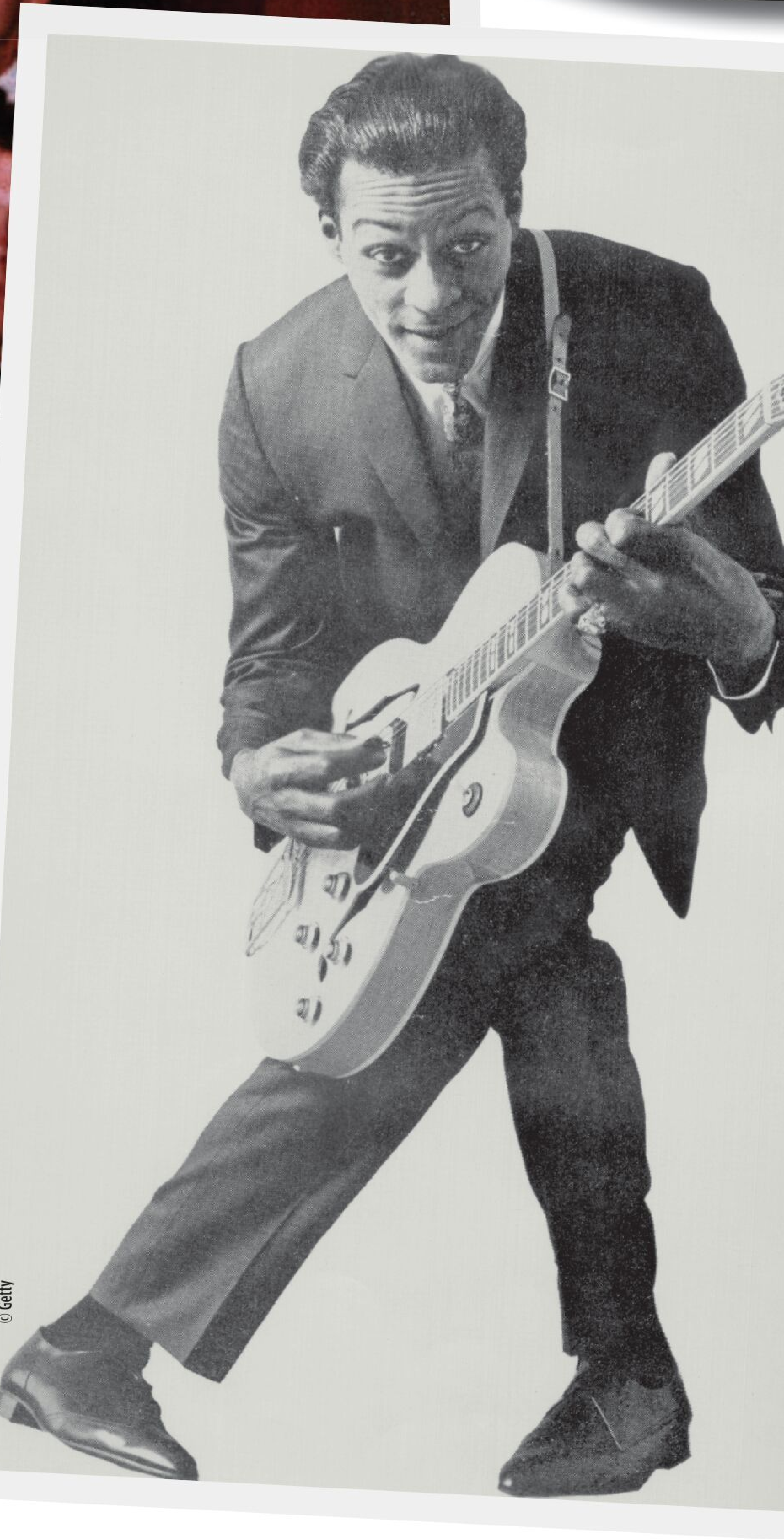
Even so, the LP had plenty of examples of what are now regarded as his signature riffs. The biggest track, chart-wise, was *School Day (Ring! Ring! Goes The Bell)*, which had already been released as a single, reaching No.3 in the pop chart in April 1957, Berry's highest placing up to that point. It hasn't impressed all his biographers and critics over the years. Fred Rothwell, author of the authoritative *Long Distance Information: Chuck Berry's Recorded Legacy*, felt that, "deliberately tailored for the white teenage market, it doesn't quite ring true". Even

so, it had an irresistible shuffle beat and featured Berry's anthemic line: "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'roll," which would be the title of a documentary on his career in 1987.

The classic bell-like guitar intro to *School Day* may sound like pure Chuck, but it's also an example of how much he owed to his collaborator and original mentor Johnnie Johnson, whose boogie woogie piano was an integral, though often overshadowed, part of his sound. Johnson later recalled how, when they came to record the track, they struggled to find a suitable intro. In a moment of inspiration, Johnson suggested lifting the short intro of an old song by 1920s boogie man Meade Lux Lewis called *Honky Tonk Train Blues*: "That was supposed to sound like a train whistle," he remembered. "Well, when Chuck played it on guitar, we thought it sounded like a school bell ringin'."

If Berry's jangly guitar interjections on *School Day*, achieving a call-and-answer effect with his vocal, are memorable enough, *Brown-Eyed Handsome Man* is an undoubted masterpiece, with semi-autobiographical overtones. For 'brown-eyed man', read 'black man', as near as you could get in the still colour conscious US of the 50s to an "I'm black and I'm proud" statement – though that didn't stop Buddy Holly cutting a more than respectable demo in Clovis, New Mexico in 1956, which, with overdubbing by the Fireballs, became a much bigger hit, in the UK at least, in 1963.

If some of Berry's mould-shaping rock riffs were actually 'borrowed' from the likes of Carl Hogan – though delivered with the visceral attack that makes the Berry Chess recordings sound so elemental – his lyrical awareness and wit was surely sharpened by listening to Louis Jordan. The jump blues maestro brilliantly utilised jive talk on such songs as *Beware!* and *Open The Door, Richard*, inventing words such as "obnoxicated", ➡



© Getty

Still looking sharp as ever, Chuck lays down some licks in the studio

© Alamy

***After School Session* was a multi-flavoured album, while retaining classic rockin' touches**

just as Berry would give us "motorvatin'" in *Maybellene*. And *No Money Down* was Berry's take on the street-savvy young black dude, turning the tables on a would-be-slick car salesman to "head on down the road" in his power-steering convertible De Ville.

Although Berry wasn't alone in waxing lyrical about cars – the subject had become a theme in rock'n'roll almost instantly with Jackie Brenston/Ike Turner's *Rocket "88"* in 1951 – automobiles would form a strong part of Berry's songs, from *Maybellene* to his 1964 hit *No Particular Place To Go*.

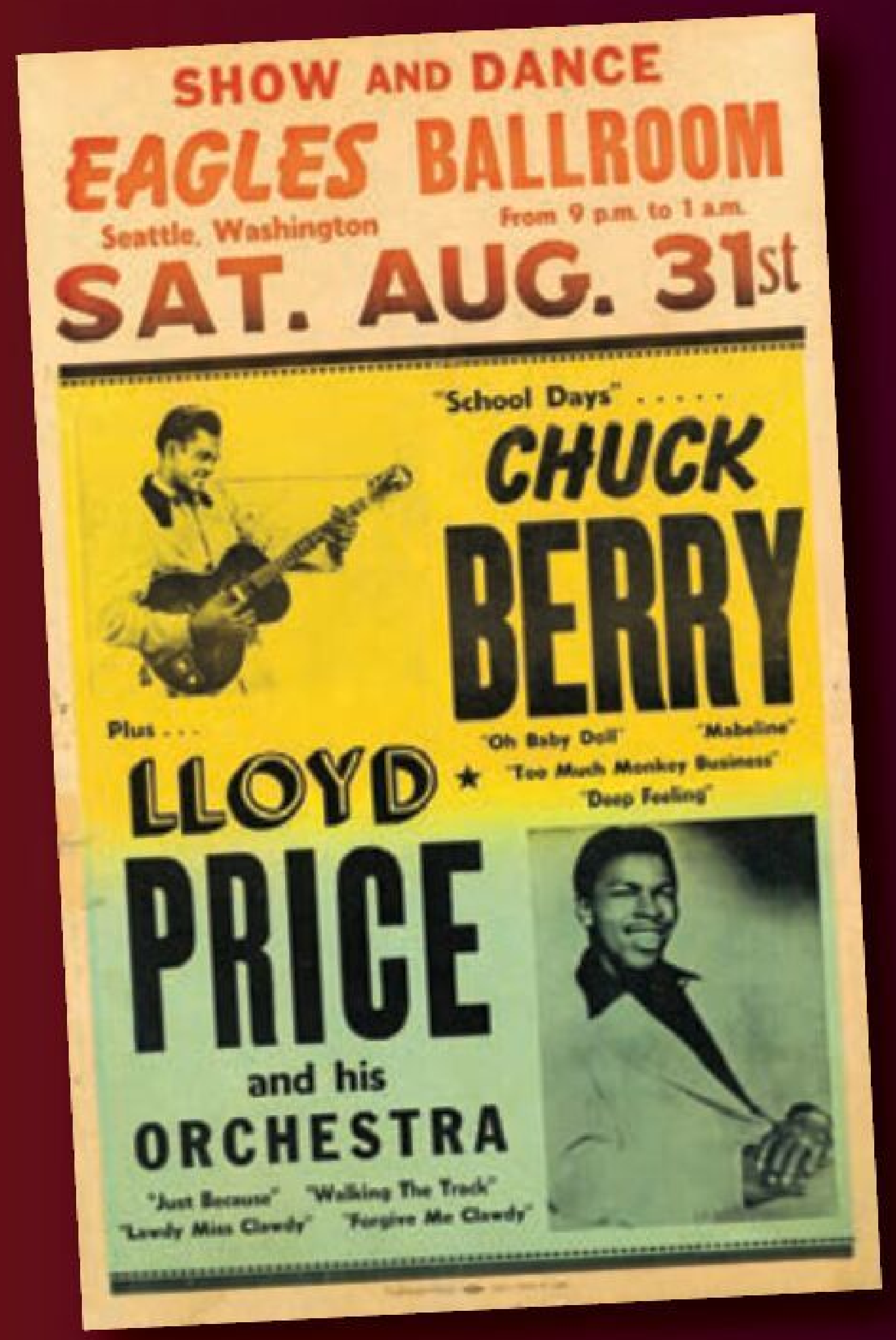
For all the glory of his guitar – which had a thicker, rougher sound than many great players of the time, like the stinging Telecaster of James Burton or the nimbler, jazz-toned playing of Cliff Gallup – it was Berry's lyrical skills that really made him different. Chuck certainly never wrote anything better than three of the songs on *After School Session*, namely *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, *No Money Down* and *Too Much Monkey Business* (the latter also includes one of his greatest guitar breaks – listen to the thrilling way his solo suddenly seems to catch fire after the fourth verse). But Johnnie Johnson, present on most of his recording sessions, would later file a lawsuit claiming co-authorship of 57 Berry songs.

The case was thrown out, but one track on *After School Session* clearly bears Johnson's imprint – *Wee Wee Hours*, an atmospheric blues-at-midnight type piece, knocked out by Berry and Johnson in 15 minutes at the same session as *Maybellene*. Johnson had actually expected "a serious blues label like Chess" would go for it as the A-side. Johnson would also contribute a lovely Chinatown flavour to the rhumba-rhythmed album closer *Drifting Heart*.

In fact, *After School Session* was a multi-flavoured Berry album, from the Caribbean patois of *Havana Moon* to the narrative drama of the uptempo country ballad *Downbound Train*, while retaining plenty of classic rockin' touches. And over 60 years later it still stands up. ⁎

A STELLAR CAST

On the road, Chuck Berry was notoriously happy to rely on unrehearsed pick-up bands. On *After School Session,* however, he had a solid cast of sidemen with him in the Chess recording studios. Key were Johnnie Johnson on piano and Ebby Hardy on drums – cohorts from Chuck's early days in St Louis, though Hardy would make way on the later sessions for Fred Below, and there has been debate that Johnson was replaced on *No Money Down* by Otis Spann. Even Muddy Waters band member Jimmy Rogers, and Hubert Sumlin, Howlin' Wolf's finest guitarist, were present on some of the sessions. Another important figure was double bass man Willie Dixon, a major figure in Chicago blues who not only backed the likes of Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Bo Diddley but also penned classics like *Wang Dang Doodle* and *Little Red Rooster*.



Fred Rothwell
ON CHUCK BERRY

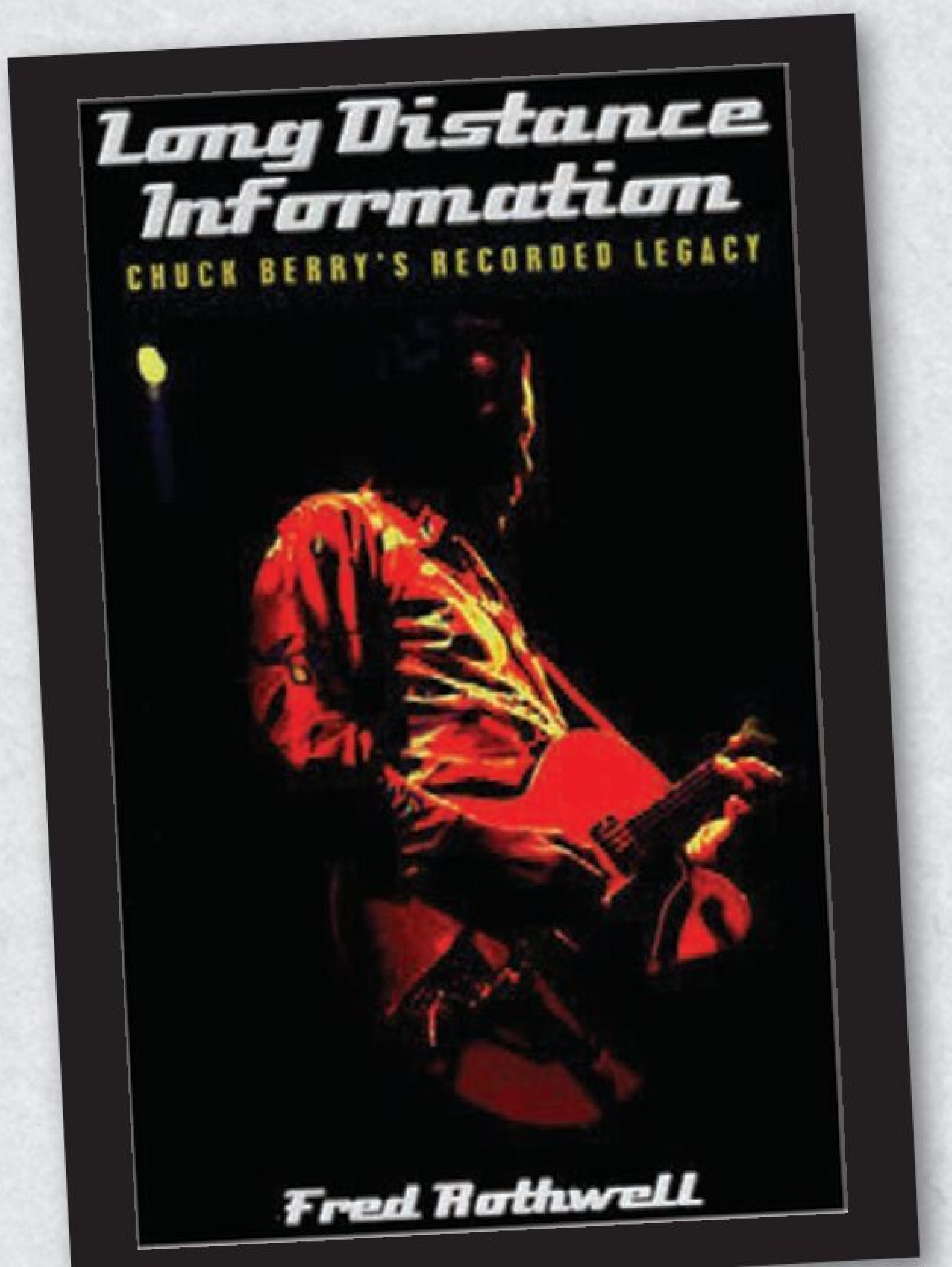
Fred Rothwell's *Long Distance Information: Chuck Berry's Recorded Legacy* is a meticulous and entertaining book – and the only comprehensive publication of its type on the subject of Berry's songs

Why did you decide to write *Long Distance Information*?
I've been an R&B fan since my early teens, and more than just listening to the music, I wanted to contribute some little thing to it. My first attempt was a Muddy Waters discography, which was good, but it needed more meat on the discographical bones. I'd also been hooked on Chuck Berry since the 1964 release of *No Particular Place To Go* on Pye International which grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Berry is a fascinating guy who has led a controversial life, but my main interest is his music, by whom he was influenced, and who he himself influenced in return.

The mid-50s threw up a rich harvest of distinctive electric guitarists. What made Chuck's sound so unique?
His musically formative years were the 40s, when big band swing began mutating into the smaller R&B combos like Louis Jordan's. Many of his recordings were in keys familiar to common jazz tunings, but less familiar in rock and roll. His choice of guitar has always been the hollow-bodied Gibson, in particular the ES-350T, the 'T' standing for the two-and-a-quarter inch 'thin' body as opposed to the fatter-bodied models often favoured by the jazzers. It gave him a more mellow sound than the harder edge of the solidbody Fender Stratocasters or Telecasters used by many rock and roll guitarists.

Berry has always been very open about his musical influences. Are there any tracks you could cite as antecedents of his guitar style?
There are so many. For examples of him sounding like jazz guitarist Charlie Christian, check out his single-string runs on sides such as *Air Mail Special*, *Solo Flight* and *Flyin' Home*. The perfect example of Carl Hogan's guitar prowess can be heard at the start of Louis Jordan's 1946 recording of *Ain't That Just Like A Woman*, which Chuck would adopt note for note and adapt on *Johnny B. Goode* and numerous other songs. T-Bone Walker's style is reflected in Chuck's blues, and the famous Elmore James riff can also be heard on a bunch of Berry compositions. Muddy Waters is omnipresent in Berry's blues, not least in *No Money Down*.

Do you think Johnnie Johnson really co-authored these songs, as he claimed in a lawsuit in 2000?
His contribution can't be underestimated. It's a fact they were collaborators on many of the songs, though not equal partners. The pair had a musical synergy which was nothing short of telepathic – something perfectly illustrated in the melancholy blues of *Wee Wee Hours* on *After School Session*, which is as much Johnnie's as Chuck's. In Johnnie's words, Chuck was a go-getter, whereas he was a more laid-back character who, had he been more astute, might have claimed part-credit for some compositions. But Berry's guitar solos were all his own, and there can be little doubt his magnificent lyrics were all his own making.



Is it true that Otis Spann – rather than Johnnie Johnson – was behind the piano on the Chess session of 1955 which included the recording of *No Money Down*?
It's impossible to be categorical, as both had a powerful boogie style, but the archetypal stop-time Chicago blues of *No Money Down* persuades me it's more likely Spann, Muddy Waters' pianist and first call piano-man at the Chess studios at this time. His playing on Muddy's *Hoochie Coochie Man*, on Bo Diddley's *I'm A Man* and Muddy's take on *Mannish Boy*, all recorded within 17 months of each other, all point in Spann's direction.

Which for you are the seminal tracks on *After School Session*?
Half the cuts on the album are premium Berry, but *Too Much Monkey Business* and *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, which also appeared first on a superb Chess single, are imbued with Chuck's lyrical genius and are crammed with dense narrative. He still finds space for a perfectly crafted guitar solo in each song, while Johnnie Johnson's piano sparkles throughout. These compositions are all the more extraordinary in that they were cut at the same time as my all-time favourite, *Roll Over Beethoven*. Wow, how the creative juices flowed that day!

***Long Distance Information: Chuck Berry's Recorded Legacy* by Fred Rothwell is published by Music Mentor Books**

Red hot mamas

Vintage Rock salutes those women who, in the 1950s, rocked just as hard as their male counterparts. Except the world wasn't ready for them...

WORDS BY **JULIE BURNS**

In the later 50s, when rock'n'roll got seriously underway, it was difficult for female artists of a rocking persuasion to exist. With Doris Day and Patti Page as top radio-star role models, all too often, a 'boys do rockabilly, girls sing pretty' scenario prevailed. In the UK, girl singers had it worse: often denied original, let alone rocking material, they had to rely on tame cover versions. As a result, female rock'n'rollers were true pioneers; those that endured and scored hits, a rare breed. Here, we salute some of the early icons of girl power...

MOULD-BREAKERS INTO HIT-MAKERS

The Queen of Rockabilly to Little Miss Dynamite

WANDA JACKSON

Elvis Costello famously said: "She was standing onstage with a guitar in her hands and making a sound that was as wild and raw as any rocker man or woman, while other gals were still asking, 'How much is that doggy in the window?'" Another Elvis – Presley – whom she toured with in '55, persuaded her to switch from country to rock. Wanda's blistering, visceral vocal was a natural match for the more rhythmic new music.

From the first Capitol record, *I Gotta Know*, (No.15), released summer '56, to her racy version of *Riot In Cell Block No.9* early in '61, she made her mark. "I had a burning fire in my bones when it came to making music,' she said. Other great Jackson rockers span *Honey Bop*, *Tongue Tied*, *Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad*, a version of Presley's *Let's Have A Party*, *Hard Headed Woman*, *Money Honey* and the 1958 cult classic, *Fujiyama Mama*, a No.1 hit in Japan. Entering largely uncharted musical waters for women, Wanda reinterpreted 'male'-oriented material or simply wrote her own songs like *Mean, Mean Man*.

In 1964, the Grammy-nominated *Two Sides Of Wanda* continued with her signature single format: country one side, rock'n'roll the other. In the mid-60s, Wanda returned to her country roots, achieving several hits. In the 80s, her career was reignited via the European revival circuit and a remarkable cache of albums starting with *Rockabilly Fever* (1986). Inspired link-ups brought new fans: *Heart Trouble* with Stray Cats and the Cramps, *The Party Ain't Over* with Jack White (2011), *Unfinished Business* with Justin Townes Earle (2012) – and at 83, this year's *Encore*, produced by Joan Jett. 'It's all been a blast,' she said. 'Musically being myself and never copying anyone.'

© Getty

© Getty

BRENDA LEE Dubbed 'the little lady (4ft 9 inches) with the big voice', since her 60s peak with pop and country, Brenda's earlier contribution to rockabilly is often overlooked. A child prodigy, Lee appeared on TV's *Ozark Jubilee* before *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In '56, backed by the cream of Nashville musicians, the pre-teen began recording for Decca. Her signature robust-style output included *Bigelow 6-200*, *Little Jonah*, and the dynamic *Dynamite*, not forgetting *Crazy Talk*, *The Stroll*, *Rock The Bop*, *Ballin' The Jack*, *Blueberry Hill* and *Rock-A-Bye Baby Blues*.

A runaway success in Europe ahead of her native States, Brenda toured France in 1959 before stealing the (TV) show in Britain, headlining Jack Good's *Oh Boy!* with *Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home*, *Hummin' The Blues Over You*, and a barnstorming finish with Lord Rockingham's XI.

Her '58 *Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree* became a seasonal cracker, while '59's stomper *Let's Jump The Broomstick* was a UK No.12 in '61, in the wake of her Top 5 turning point, *Sweet Nothin's*.

Next, she toured the UK with Gene Vincent, and also opened for The Beatles in Hamburg. Despite a string of huge hits in more ballad vein, she reverted to a Janis Joplin-style rock-out on *Is It True* b/w *What'd I Say* with Jimmy Page on guitar, recording in London in 1964. With a strong international following, she sold some 100 million records, only surpassed in the 60s by Elvis, The Beatles and Ray Charles, and is the only female to be inducted into both the Country and Rock and Roll Halls of Fame.

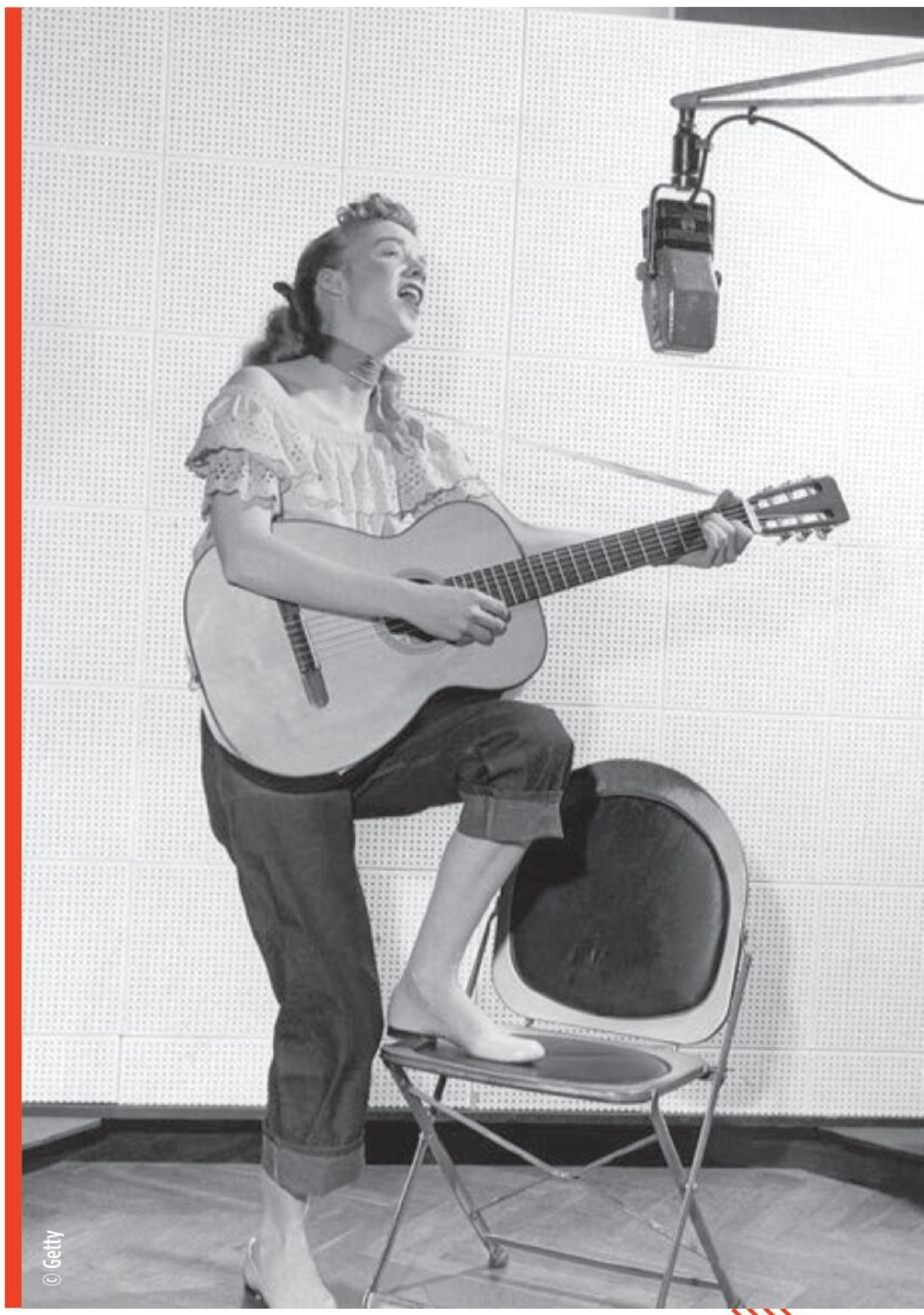
THE 'FEMALE ELVIS' CONTINGENT

The next big thing... for a while

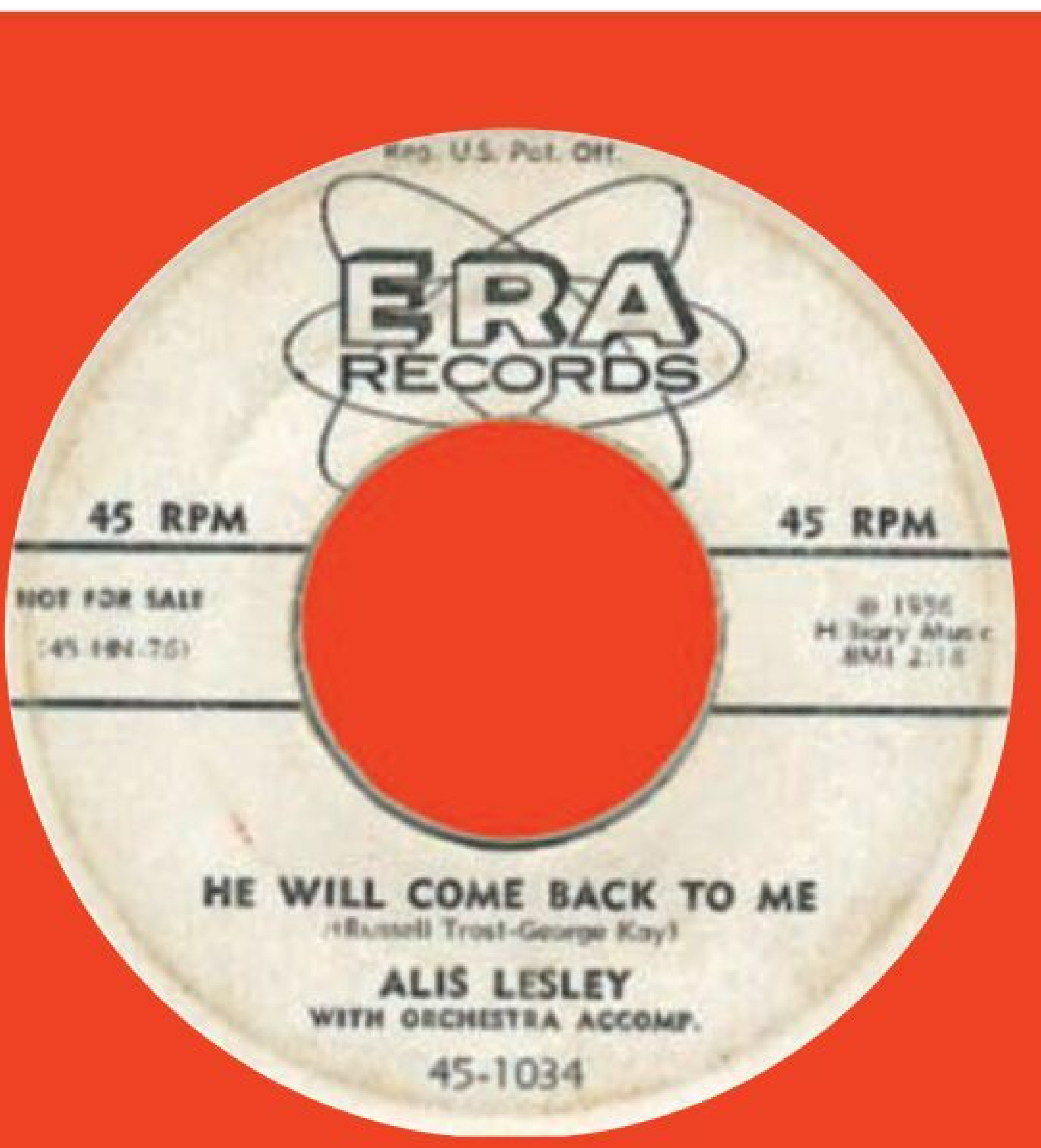
JANIS MARTIN She had her own radio show aged eight, and was out on the road performing from 12 to 13. By 15, Janis "found black church music and put it into white hillbilly" – and signed to RCA. Her double-sided smash, *Will You Willyum* b/w self-penned debut *Drugstore Rock And Roll,* proved that girls could sell authentic rock on a major label. A national sensation, it was the biggest rockabilly hit ever written and recorded by a female. The Top 40 crossover cut sold an unheard of 750,000 copies.

Two months after signing Presley, RCA hailed Janis as the 'Female Elvis', a title she disliked. She had only met the singer twice and not early enough to absorb his style as implied – nevertheless she wryly penned tribute *My Boy Elvis* for her next hit disc. Then followed *Let's Elope Baby* (appearing on rare RCA LP *Janis And Elvis*), through to '58's *Cracker Jack* and *Bang Bang*, laden with top musicians and produced by Chet Atkins. In demand all over – from *American Bandstand* and the Grand Ole Opry to tours with Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins – even an MGM screen test – the world was at her feet. Then it crashed. Janis' secret came out. At 15, pre-RCA, she'd eloped to marry her paratrooper boyfriend, reuniting with him at 17 on a USO tour of Europe, and returning home pregnant. After two meteoric years, she was dropped.

In 1960, she made a comeback on Belgian label Palette, but her second husband insisted she quit showbiz. She worked for the Virginia Police Department until *Goldmine* magazine rediscovered her during a rockabilly revival across Europe. Aged 42, Janis and her fans were ecstatic she was back onstage. In 1995, two duets graced Rosie Flores' *Rockabilly Filly* album, while her spirited final recordings were showcased on 2012's *Blanco Sessions* – a project brought about by Flores herself.



© Getty

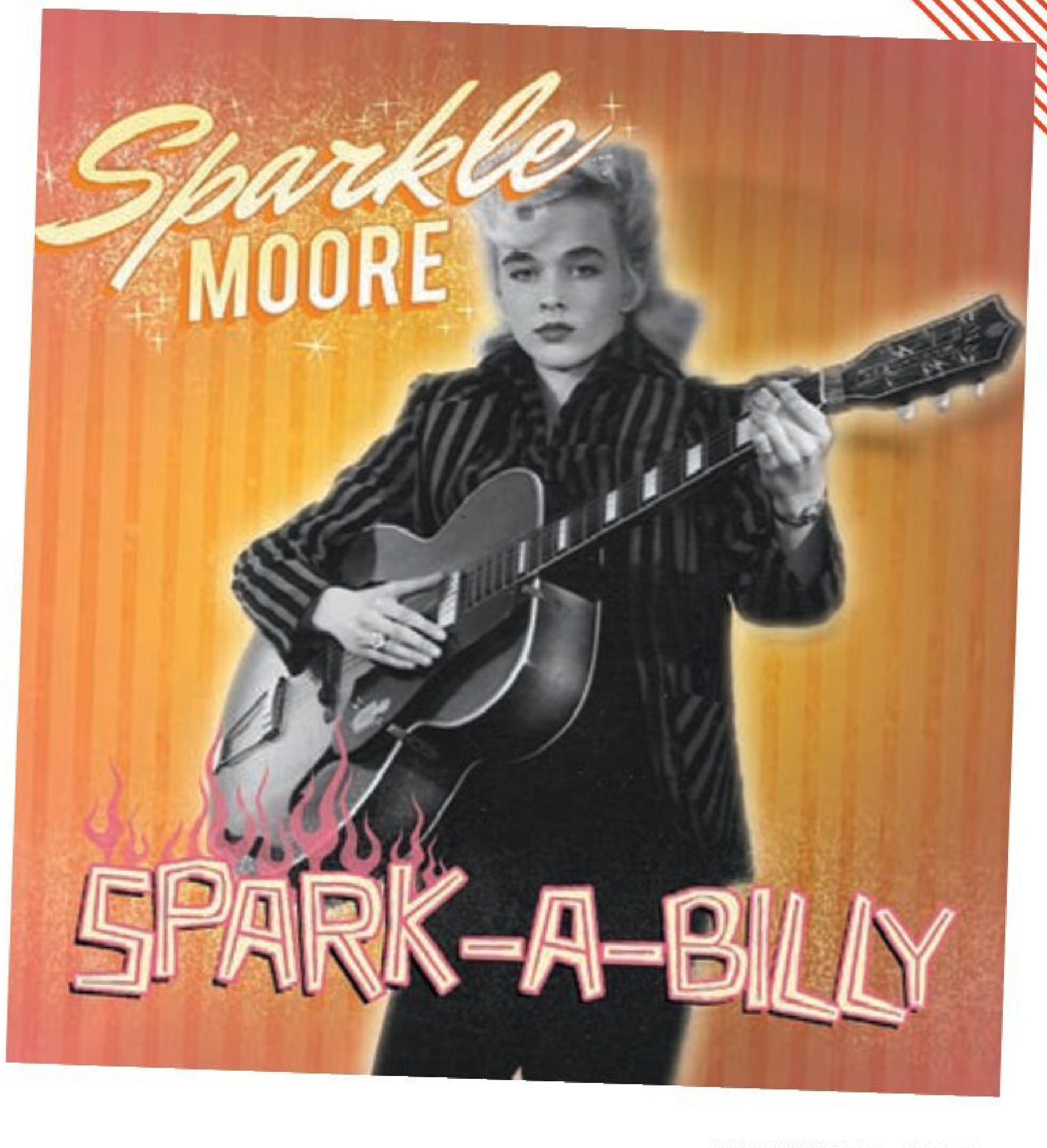


ALIS LESLIE Alice – known also as Alys or Alis – was truly her own singular creation and sensation. Eye-popping for the time, the suited, guitar-slinging, duck-tailed vision complete with 'girl sideburns' would rip it up with back-bending abandon and kick off her shoes into her appreciative audience at the Club Avalon in New Jersey – famed stomping ground of Bill Haley. Subsequently performing at the Silver Slipper in Las Vegas in 1956, such was her reputation that Elvis decided to fly in to witness her wild show. That same year, Alice recorded for Era, including *He Will Come Back To Me* and *Heartbreak Harry*. In '58, she guested on an all-star package tour of Australia, alongside Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent and Little Richard. Around this time, she recorded for Sam Phillips in Memphis, though the "deal did not go through", she later said. Testament to her potential, six takes of her unreleased recording of the Charlie Rich song *Handsome Man* survive. Despite Rich's championing of Leslie's version, Sun's would-be rocker Barbara Pittman (see page 106) instead recorded the track, a minor hit in 1960. As for Alice, she returned to her native Arizona to attend to her ailing mother. In a finale you couldn't invent, she became a missionary, before reverting to singing – sort of – as a vocal coach.

SPARKLE MOORE Inspired by early performances of Elvis and Bill Haley, Barbara Morgan – aka Sparkle – became, she said, "a moth to the flame of rock'n'roll". The 19-year-old rockabilly filly made a quick and cult impact with four self-penned tracks on Fraternity. First up in November '56, came the hiccupping *Rock-A-Bop*. Flipside *Skull And Cross Bones* underlined that the guitar-toting bombshell had lashings of sass. May '57 saw the no-less-edgy *Killer/Tiger*; the slinky-yet-sinister *Killer* was a world away from most sugar-sweet 50s female output.

Sparkle put her signature guitar-work down to spending time with the 'King of the Hawaiian guitar' Sol Hoopii. Despite intense public interest, as she opened for Tommy Sands and Gene Vincent, and played with Grand Ole Opry figures including Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb, her recording career exploded and was over in a year – though she still performed rockabilly from '54-'60.

Thereafter, contrary to reports, she was neither sacked from Fraternity nor retired from music. She continued, largely on the wedding/coffee-house circuit, but turned down offers to guest on the revival scene, not wanting to "present... exactly as you left the scene in '57". Her songs now grace some 35 compilations; her fave is *Good Girls Gone Bad (Wild, Weird, And Wonderful)*. In 2010, back she slinked with her *Spark-A-Billy* album. 'Old kats never die, they just keep on purr-r-in!' she meowed.



SUN SIRENS

History-making Hits and Misses

SUN
I NEED A MAN
BARBARA PITTMAN
253
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

BARBARA PITTMAN Despite recording four diverse singles and being one of Sun's few contracted females, hers is a notorious 'what if?' story. As a pre-teen she debuted at the Eagle's Nest nightclub, arranged by her then-unknown classmate Elvis. She'd already auditioned for Sam Phillips, who told her to return when she was older. A gutsy girl, she went out on the road with western showman Lash LaRue, before returning to Sun to perform on the same package tour line-ups that showcased Elvis, Jerry Lee, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash. In '56, she delivered the punchy disc *I Need A Man* ("Here's the black shack sound, female style," noted *Billboard*). Coerced briefly into pop (*Two Young Fools In Love*), it was third time lucky on *Cold Cold Heart* b/w *Everlasting Love* – a regional sales hit, as was 1960s *Handsome Man*. However, a lack of Sun promo for the female ratio would be to Barbara's detriment. "Sam wouldn't push my records even if they started to sell… it always bothered me," she said. "Sam wanted me to do Connie Francis stuff. Little girl stuff. Cutesy, petite and pretty. I just refused to sing that stuff." Never fully supported at Sun into becoming her own rocking blues woman, Barbara marched on to wider, more diverse things from recording movie soundtracks under pseudonyms to gigging with Johnny and Dorsey Burnette.

JEAN CHAPEL Unlike Barbara Pittman, Mae West lookalike Jean Chapel was feted at Sun for her bluesy rockabilly ability. Jean became the first officially titled and promoted 'Female Elvis' – both by Sun and RCA Victor – in a unique parallel to Elvis' own career path. Her original cut of *Welcome To The Club* (Sun 244) was even flipped with Presley's *Love Me Tender* as their first joint record try-out for RCA, while her B-side, *I Wont Be Rockin' Tonight*, was penned by Presley's prestige *Hearbreak Hotel*-writing pair (Mae Axton/Tommy Durden). Appearing on the Hickory label in '54, first as Mattie O'Neil before Opal Jean Amburgey, Jean also formed a hillbilly trio with her sisters, The Coon Creek Girls, later The Amber Sisters. Sun picked up on her talent in 1956 and leased her earlier Nashville recordings ahead of RCA. Her signature rocker remains 1957's *Oo-Ba La Baby* on RCA. Into the 60s, she cut the catchy *Don't Let Go*. Recording for several labels in all, she reinvented herself, yet again, as club performer Opal Jean Cologne. Finally, she found success in Nashville writing over 400 songs for artists from Hank Snow to Big Joe Turner, and Patsy Cline to Dean Martin.

SUN
RECORD COMPANY
WELCOME TO THE CLUB
(Mae B. Axton)
JEAN CHAPEL
244
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

R&B ROYALTY

They put the pop into R&B and made it rock

RUTH BROWN Hot on the heels and squeals of Rosetta Tharpe and Marie Knight, came the exuberant, belting Brown. In the late-40s, the soon-to-be 'Queen of R&B' was a ballad singer before Atlantic Records supremo Ahmet Ertegun suggested she move uptempo. Brown never looked back. Such was her consistent commercial success that Atlantic became known as 'the house that Ruth built.' By '55, Ruth's records had already remained on the R&B chart for a total of 149 weeks. This included '53's evergreen *(Mama) He Treats Your Daughter Mean* to '55 solid sender *As Long As I'm Moving*.

A popular performer on the racially segregated circuit, she also enjoyed crossover kudos, starting in '57 with Leiber and Stoller's *Lucky Lips* (No.6 R&B/No.25 pop). Its infectious '58 follow-up, *This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'*, reached No.7 R&B and No.24 pop. End of era R&B hits *I Don't Know* and *Don't Deceive Me* preceded 60s domesticity.

© Getty

Then, in the mid-70s, Ruth relaunched as a sassy Grammy-awarded singer and Tony-winning actress, appearing on Broadway and in John Waters' cult flick *Hairspray*. In 1987, her campaigning work for musician's rights and royalties (including her own) led to the formation of the Rhythm and Blues Foundation. Altogether, she scored 21 Top 10 hits, with five No.1s, and was still touring in her 70s.

★ ICONIC ONE-OFFS & HONOURABLE MENTIONS ★

© Getty

BIG MAYBELLE In common with R&B belter Big Mama Thornton, Maybelle also inspired a huge rock'n'roll hit by a great male rocker. As Thornton had, historians say, "helped to bring in the dawn of rock'n'roll" with her 1952 version of *Hound Dog*, reinterpreted by Elvis in '56, in '55, Maybelle cut *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On*, two years before Jerry Lee Lewis. Lewis publicly credited Maybelle as having inspired him to make his own take "lots louder, more raunchy and raucous".

© Getty

NANCY WHISKEY Arguably the only 50s British woman to rock it – OK, skiffle it – up to hit level, Ms. Whiskey enjoyed chart success in 1957 with Chas McDevitt on *Freight Train*. It fast-tracked her into films, namely *The Tommy Steele Story* and *The Golden Disc* with Terry Dene. According to *The Guardian*: "If Lonnie Donegan was King Of Skiffle, then Nancy Whiskey was fleetingly its Queen."

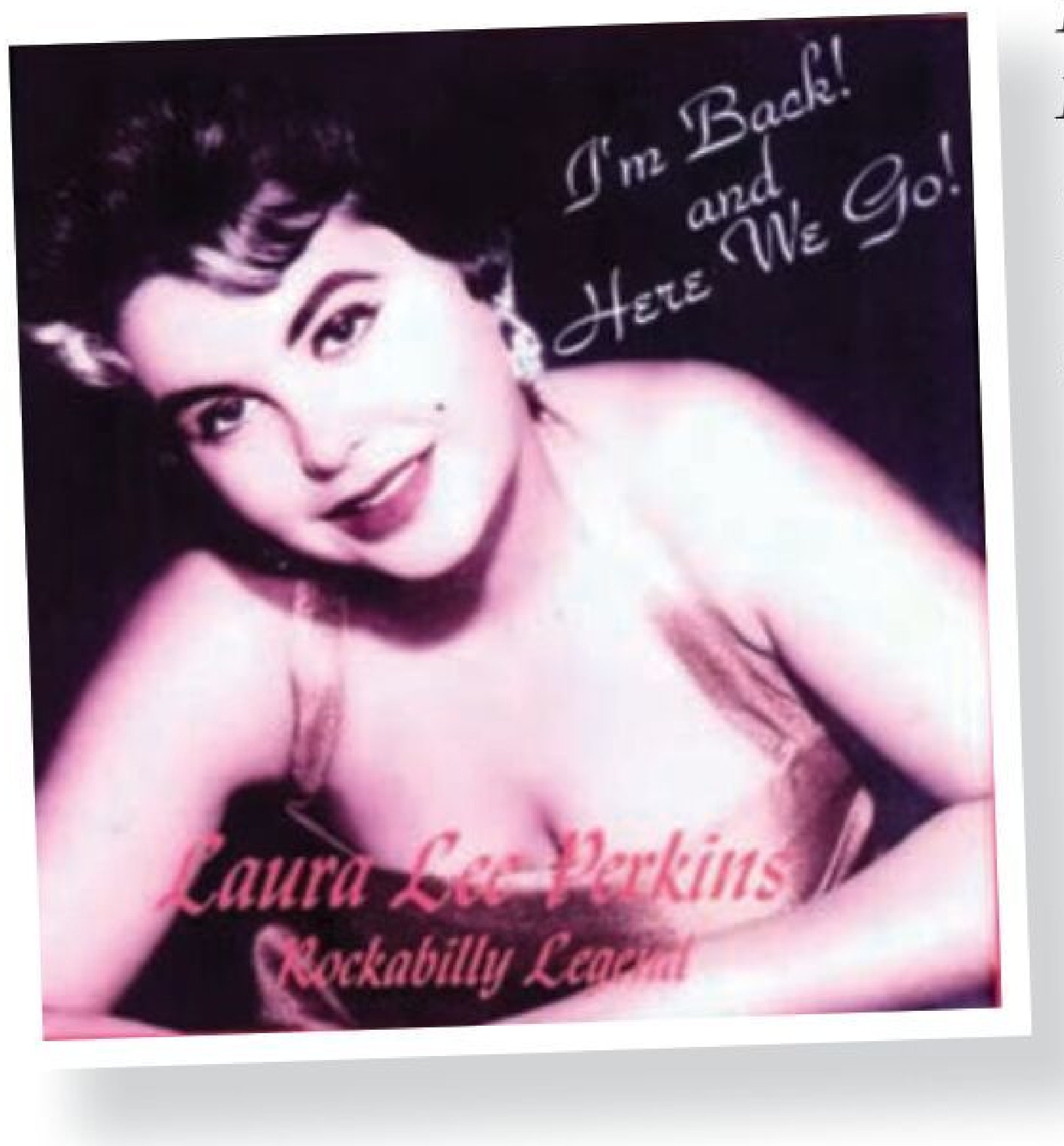
© Getty

LAVERN BAKER Like labelmate Ruth Brown, former Chicago club singer and Okeh artist Ms. Baker soon found crossover fame. Her first upbeat number *Tweedle Dee* scored No.4 R&B and No.14 pop – but shot to No.1 for white singer Georgia Gibbs. Baker's attempt to sue for copyright violation went nowhere. No matter. By the end of '56, she had a million-selling No.1 gold disc for *Jim Dandy*, later named one of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs That Shaped Rock And Roll, while follow-up, *Jim Dandy Got Married*, made R&B No.7; other R&B top fivers included *Bop-Ting-A-Ling*, *Play It Fair* and *Still*.

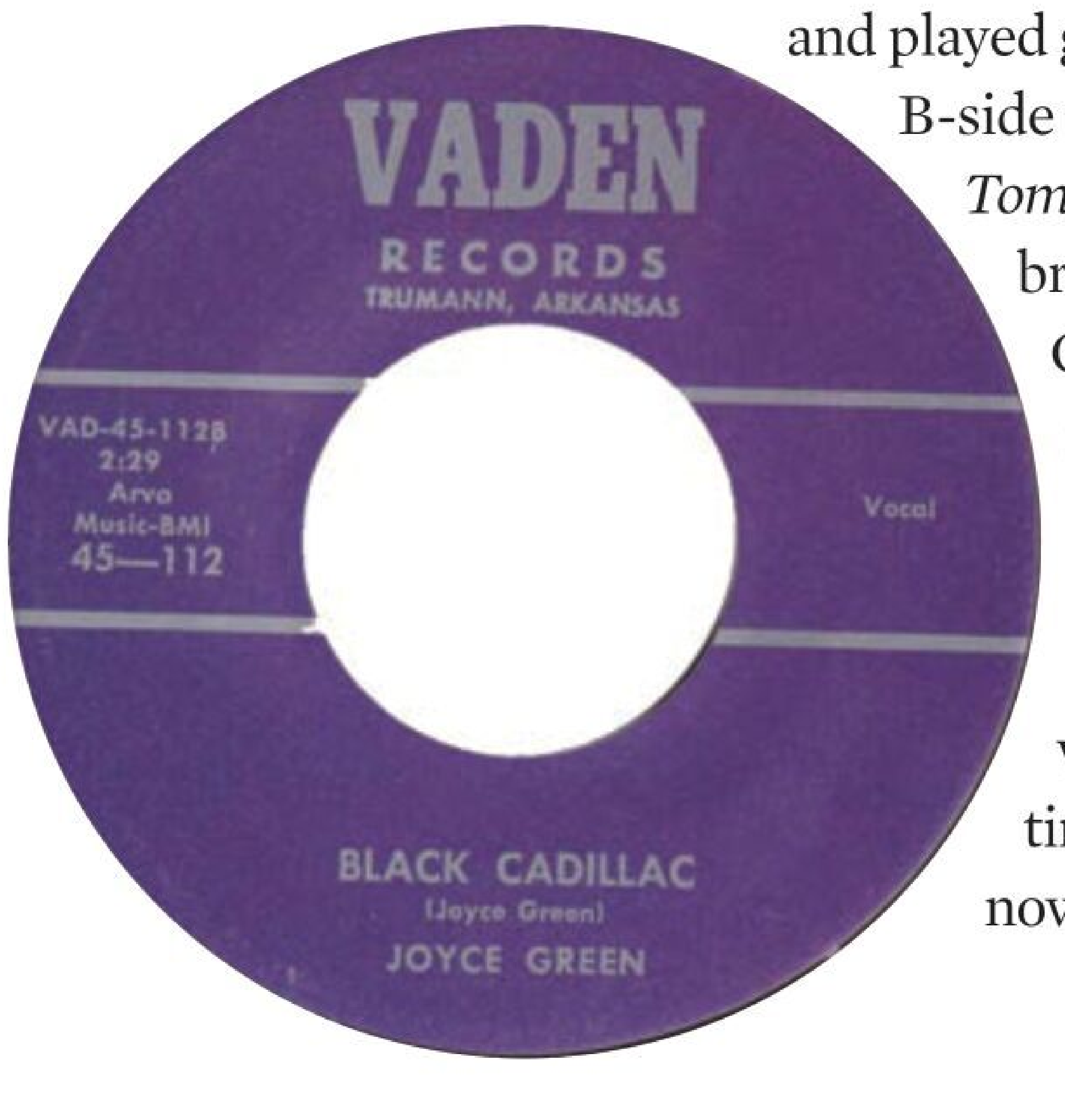
In 1958, her next big crossover hits were *I Cried A Tear*, with sax by King Curtis, before the Neil Sedaka number *I Waited Too Long*. A darling of TV's Ed Sullivan and Alan Freed, LaVern also made films – *Rock, Rock, Rock!* and *Mister Rock And Roll* – and in '57, she toured Australia alongside Bill Haley. Still hit-making in the early-60s, she left Atlantic for Brunswick, and later recorded *Think Twice*, a raunchy duet single with Jackie Wilson.

From '69, following a USO tour, she became entertainment director of the NCO club in the Philippines, and remained for 22 years before returning to the US, appearing on film soundtracks *Shag*, *Dick Tracy*, and *A Rage In Harlem*. Like Ruth Brown, Baker was among the first recipients of the Rhythm And Blues Foundation's Pioneer Award, in 1990. Courageously, she continued performing, even after losing both legs due to diabetes in 1994.

LAURA LEE PERKINS Impressively snubbing a signing with Sun, the multi-instrumentalist chose Imperial, home to her idol Ricky Nelson. Behind rare slices of rockabilly such as '58's *Don't Wait Up* and *Kiss Me Baby*, she became known as 'The Female Jerry Lee Lewis'. Never a commercial success, more recently her records became hot with collectors, while in 2006 she released the album *I'm Back! And Here We Go! –Laura Lee Perkins, Rockabilly Legend* on Raucous.



JOYCE GREEN Considered one of the finest female rockabilly songs in existence, 1959's thrilling epic to wronged women, *Black Cadillac*, was written by 19-year-old Joyce, who sang and played guitar on the record, cut as B-side to the more conventional *Tomorrow*, penned by her brother. A tour alongside Carl Perkins sadly did nothing to further things for her and Joyce would not record again until the 70s, but these recordings were lost in a fire. The timeless *Black Cadillac* is now a collector's item.



Disgraced American DJ Alan Freed (1921-1965) was the ultimate rock and roll impresario

© Getty

PAYOLA 1959!

Alan Freed was one of the great champions of rock and roll, but would become engulfed in scandal in the late 1950s...

WORDS BY **BILL DAHL**

Rock and roll's mid-50s explosion made instant stars of the genre's groundbreaking first generation. Those icons weren't the only dynamic voices that teenagers dug daily over the American radio airwaves. A battalion of mellifluous, motor-mouthed deejays spun the latest big hits and promoted the latest discoveries, their manic patter complementing the savage music they championed.

Those major-market disc jockeys wielded incredible power over what aired during their shifts. They could instantly make or break a new act because the majority of them programmed the records they played during their shifts on air. It soon became apparent to a lot of them just how much money could be accrued under the table from the hordes of independent record labels and distributors eager to lock down crucial airplay that would make their records national hits.

At the time, no Federal laws prohibited what became known as 'payola'. A public uproar happened anyway when publicity-hungry legislators and stodgy defenders of middle-of-the-road pop music decided that rock and roll had become a full-fledged threat to the status quo and decided to make pariahs out of a handful of leading rock and roll deejays by dragging them into court and congressional chambers to testify to their alleged transgressions.

Quite a few popular jocks lost their jobs and careers across the United States in the wake of the investigations, whether or not they admitted to receiving payoffs. Alan Freed, responsible more than any other American radio personality for tirelessly promoting the rock and roll cause over the airwaves, was ruined by the allegations and died a broken man a few years later. Dick Clark, host of the nationally televised daily record hop *American Bandstand*, got off scot-free and endured as a ubiquitous television presence for another half-century.

Though not the first, Freed had been one of the earliest white DJs in the US to exclusively play rhythm and blues on his nightly show over WJW radio in Cleveland, where he was billed as 'Moondog'. It took a while for white teens to catch on to what he was doing, but eventually they did. Freed augmented his income by promoting R&B concerts, managing vocal groups, launching his own record label and distributorship, and dubiously claiming songwriting credits on platters by his two main acts, The Moonglows and The Coronets.

> **Quite a few popular jocks lost their jobs in the wake of the investigations**

WHEN THE EXTROVERTED DJ moved to New York in the autumn of 1954 to broadcast over WINS, the presence of an eccentric street performer also calling himself 'Moondog' forced Alan to use his real moniker on the air. But his big beat-driven formula continued unabated, now promoted incessantly by the jock as rock and roll. As rapid as Freed's rise to fame in New York was, so was the speed with which he milked it for all he was worth. Leonard Chess curried favour by handing him a piece of the songwriting credit on Chuck Berry's '55 debut smash *Maybellene* (Berry was understandably miffed). Chess had previously listed Freed as co-writer on The Moonglows' hit *Sincerely*.

Along with his nightly radio programme at WINS, Freed resumed his rock and roll stage show presentations on a bigger scale at top New York theatres, raking in huge box office tallies. Fans outside the New York area were exposed to Freed's rapid patter on a nationally syndicated radio programme and in a series of low-budget film musicals – *Rock Around The Clock*, *Don't Knock The Rock*, *Rock Rock Rock!*, *Mister Rock And Roll* and *Go, Johnny, Go!* – that Freed co-starred in. He launched his own music publishing firm, and Coral Records even signed him to a contract, though he did little more than overdub enthusiastic interjections on lively instrumentals by some of New York's top R&B sessioneers.

American Bandstand host Dick Clark deep in discussion with producer Tony Mammarella

© Getty

Freed made plenty of powerful industry friends in New York, most notably Morris Levy, the gangland-tied nightclub owner who became Freed's manager and head of Roulette Records (which Freed initially had a piece of). Label bosses and distributors grateful for Freed's airplay of their product dreamed up all kinds of novel ways to show their undying gratitude, even paying the mortgage on his Connecticut estate. Freed steadfastly described their largesse as "gifts" for his expertise in picking hits rather than outright bribes in exchange for the spins.

ONCE CLARK ASSUMED the hosting reins of *American Bandstand* from the disgraced Bob Horn in 1957, Freed had himself a worthy rival. Broadcasting out of a Philadelphia television studio with a cast of appealing teens at his side and rock'n'roll and pop stars stopping by daily to mime their hits, the clean-cut young Clark made Freed look like a piker when it came to dipping his hands into a multitude of musical pies.

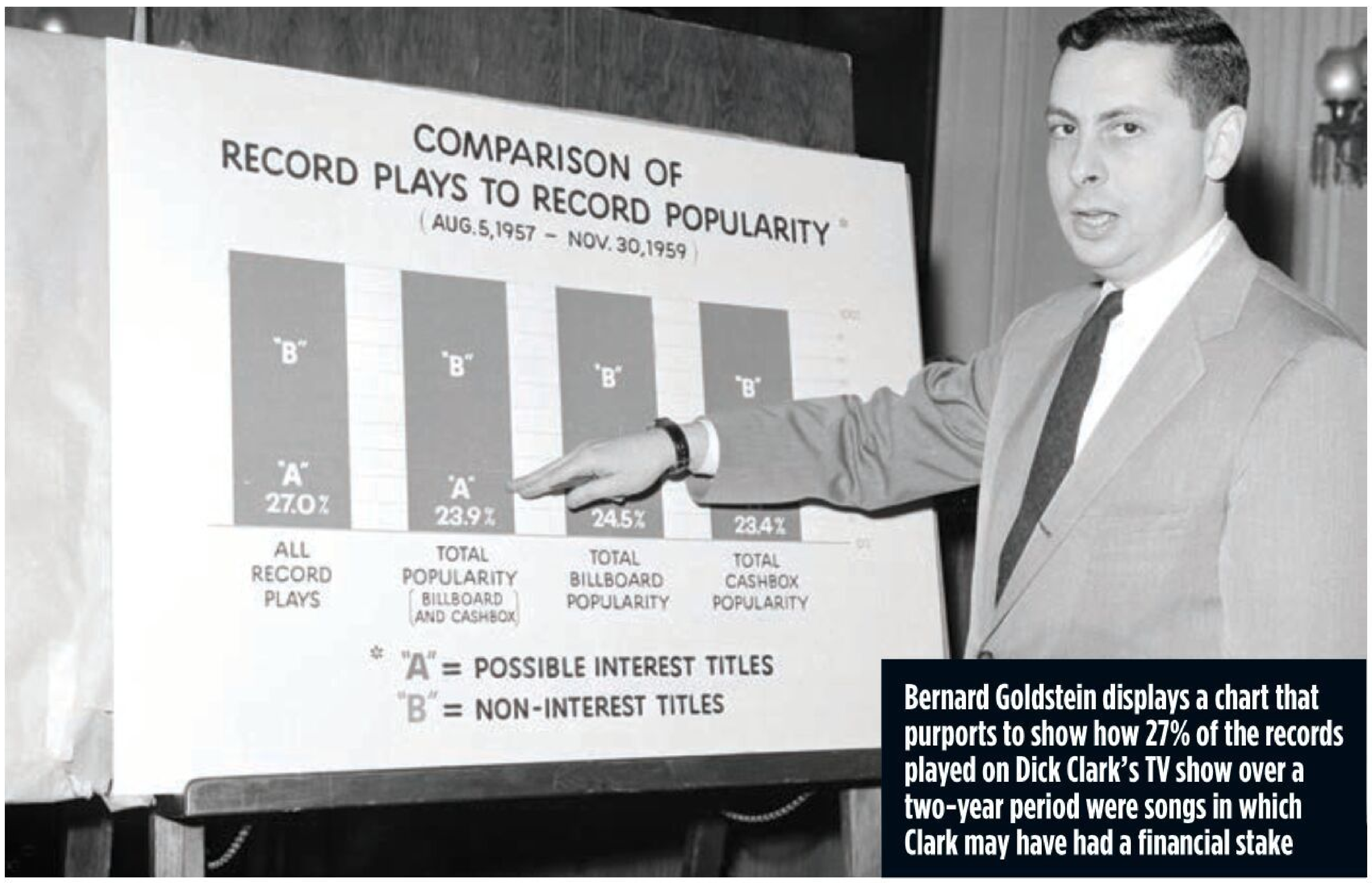
In addition to operating his own music publishing firm (Sea-Lark) that acquired promising songs and gave them massive exposure on his programme, Clark owned a piece of the local labels Jamie and Swan, regularly featuring their artists' latest releases on the show. The musical guests had to sign their performance fees for the show back over to Clark's company.

There's no denying that Clark knew how to fashion a hit. His sage advice to songwriter Johnny Madara regarding one of his compositions with Dave White resulted in a smash for Philly vocal group Danny & The Juniors. "Dick heard *Do The Bop*, and he said, 'Well, you know, the Bop isn't that big around the country. Why don't you guys rewrite the lyric, maybe make it something about record hops?'" said Madara. "'Do The Bop – At The Hop!'"

Label owners and DJs entered into all kinds of shady relationships. Hy Weiss, the garrulous owner of New York's Old Town Records, became known as the inventor of 'the $50 handshake' – a crude but efficient way of greasing important DJ palms. It wasn't unusual for record spinners to own publishing firms and labels, promote rock and roll shows, write songs, or cut platters and then play their creations on the air, their listeners none the wiser. In Chicago, WGES radio personality Al Benson, the Windy City's top African-American DJ, had his own effective method of charging local record distributors for airplay.

"Al had each distributor with a certain allotment of records," explained the late Carl Davis, then working for Benson as his assistant and tabulator of Al's weekly survey sheet and later a top Chicago soul producer for the Okeh and Brunswick/Dakar labels. "The bigger you were, the more records you had. So if you were Lenny Garmisa, you might have three records. If you were All State Distributors, you might have six. If you were an individual, you got maybe one record. But there was a price for that. They had to pay for that.

"On top of paying for it, he [promoted concerts at] the Regal Theater, so if you had one of your records and he was playing it, then you had to give him that artist free for the Regal Theater. And you had to pay the artist. So he would give his shows at the Regal, and he was making money both ways – making money for playing the record, [and] he was making money for you


COMPARISON OF RECORD PLAYS TO RECORD POPULARITY*
(AUG.5,1957 – NOV. 30,1959)
"B"
"B"
"B"
"B"
"A" 27.0%
"A" 23.9%
24.5%
23.4%
ALL RECORD PLAYS
TOTAL POPULARITY (BILLBOARD AND CASHBOX)
TOTAL BILLBOARD POPULARITY
TOTAL CASHBOX POPULARITY
* "A" = POSSIBLE INTEREST TITLES
"B" = NON-INTEREST TITLES

Bernard Goldstein displays a chart that purports to show how 27% of the records played on Dick Clark's TV show over a two-year period were songs in which Clark may have had a financial stake

© Alamy

TOMMY "DRJIVE" SMALLS

THE GEORGIA-BORN DJ WAS ALAN FREED'S RIVAL

Unlike the way it was in Cleveland, Alan Freed wouldn't exclusively own the R&B airwaves when he arrived in New York City in 1954. There would be competition from other DJs, notably Tommy 'Dr. Jive' Smalls. His daily late-afternoon programme on WWRL radio already had him positioned as the man to beat.

The Savannah, Georgia-born Smalls had been his hometown's first black DJ when he manned the mic at WSAV in 1947 before relocating to New York in 1952. As Dr. Jive, he specialised in playing R&B and doo-wop on WWRL, and he presented live R&B shows at the fabled Apollo Theater.

The rest of the country became aware of Smalls on 20 November, 1955, when TV variety show host Ed Sullivan allowed Dr. Jive to emcee a groundbreaking R&B revue on his CBS-TV network programme. Smalls opened his segment with Bo Diddley doing his self-named smash, followed by LaVern Baker belting *Tweedle Dee*, The Five Keys delivering *Ling Ting Tong*, and for a grand finale, sax honker Willis 'Gator' Jackson cutting loose on a frenetic instrumental. Smalls had given the nation's TV viewers their first taste of honest-to-goodness rock'n'roll.

Like Freed, Smalls died young – at the age of 45 in 1972.

A grave-faced Alan Freed outside the courtroom with his attorney Paul T Smith

© Getty

performing at the Regal Theater. So he was cleaning up both ways."

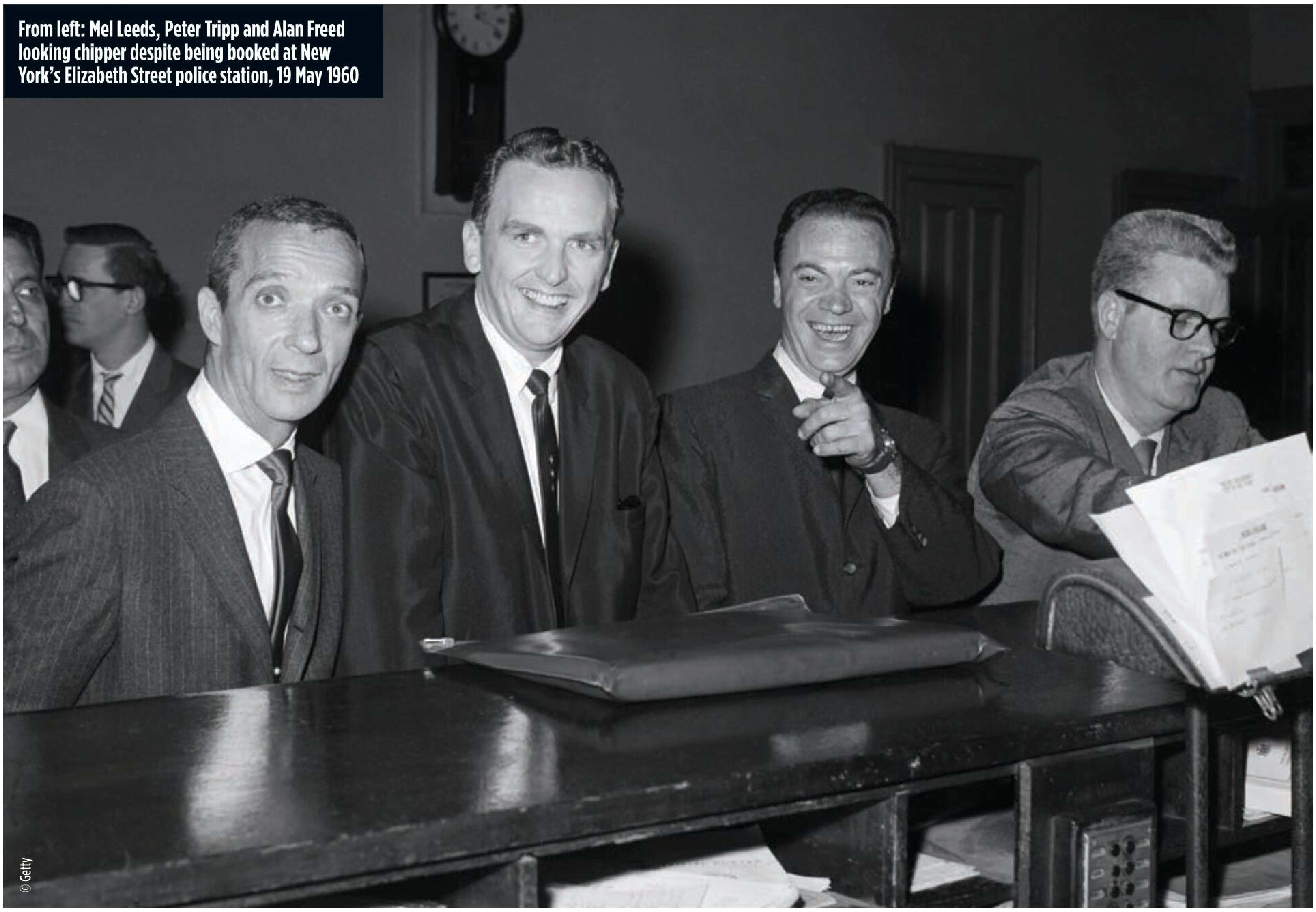
As the figurehead for rock and roll's rapid rise, Freed was forced to deal with a lot of negative fallout during his reign from exploitative press and preening politicians that escalated after a handful of violent incidents following his 1958 stage show in Boston. Despite the late-50s advent of Top 40 radio formatting, which removed the music programming responsibility from DJs, they would be the primary scapegoats for the payola scandal.

John A. Jackson's 1991 book *Big Beat Heat – Alan Freed And The Early Years Of Rock & Roll* reports that ASCAP, the old-school publishing organisation representing Tin Pan Alley pop songwriters, was so threatened by the mammoth success of its upstart rival BMI, which handled most rock and roll and R&B material, that it lobbied legislators incessantly as it attempted to regain its lost superiority on the US airwaves. Fresh off their headline-grabbing investigation into rigged television quiz programs, the US Congress turned up the pressure on radio broadcasters in late 1959. Station honchos began to panic, quizzing their jocks as to whether they'd accepted any cash to play specific songs. The ones who admitted they had or dared to defend payola publicly were either let go or jumped ship before they were fired – three at Detroit's WJBK alone.

American Bandstand producer Tony Mammarella divulged he was falsely listed as composer of Charlie Gracie's 1957 hit *Butterfly*, which had been played regularly on the show, with Mammarella picking up $7,000 in royalties that ostensibly went to Clark. Powerful King Records boss Syd Nathan complained that he was fed up with paying off jocks, claiming he'd been laying out $2,000 a month and stating that payola was "plain blackmail."

FREED REFUSED TO sign an affidavit at WABC radio (where he'd landed after WINS fired him) stating that he hadn't participated in any payola shenanigans,

➡



From left: Mel Leeds, Peter Tripp and Alan Freed looking chipper despite being booked at New York's Elizabeth Street police station, 19 May 1960

© Getty

so he was summarily fired in November of 1959. He lost his programme on WNEW–TV right after that. Similarly, Clark wouldn't sign anything either until the affidavit was rewritten to suit his situation, but he remained employed by the ABC-TV network nonetheless. Meanwhile, the Federal Trade Commission went after a handful of labels, charging RCA Victor, Atlantic, Roulette, George Goldner's Gone and End labels, Herald, ABC-Paramount, and Jerry Blaine's Cosnat Distributing and Jay-Gee Records with payola.

Unlike the feds, the state of New York did have statutes on its books barring commercial bribery. That gave Assistant District Attorney Joseph Stone's office the ammunition to investigate Freed's business practices as well as those of other local broadcasters. Levy admitted in front of a jury that he'd loaned Freed $20,000.

Once Clark assumed the hosting reins of *American Bandstand*, Freed had himself a worthy rival

CAMEO
Maryland Music Pub. Co. B.M.I.
14
BUTTERFLY
(ANTHONY SEPTEMBER)
CHARLIE GRACIE
Orchestra and Chorus Under Direction of BERNIE LOWE
105-A

Butterfly was 'written' by 'Anthony September' (actually a pseudonym of Anthony Mammarella)

If America's rock and roll DJs weren't already under siege enough, a US House subcommittee began its hearings on payola and its effects on radio programming in the spring of 1960. Freed testified early in the heavily publicised proceedings and Clark later on; despite intense grilling, Clark couldn't be pinned down on any illegalities.

Neither could Freed, for that matter. But he wasn't so lucky with the New York grand jury. On 19 May 1960, he was arrested on commercial bribery charges along with DJs from other stations: WMGM's Peter Tripp, WWRL's Tommy 'Dr Jive' Smalls, and WLIB's Hal Jackson and Jack Walker. Also booked were Mel Leeds and two record librarians, all hauled down to a local precinct for processing.

Tripp was found guilty on 35 counts but was fined only $500 and given a suspended sentence. Smalls and Walker pled guilty as well. In December of '62, Freed did likewise, receiving a small fine and suspended sentence. The FTC dropped its charges against the labels, and the Federal Communications Commission decided WINS wouldn't lose its operating license due to its payola involvement. No doubt relieved, owner J Elroy McCaw quickly sold the station for a massive profit.

The end result of all the payola investigations? Apart from too many headlines and too much political bluster, the primary development was the homogenisation of rock and roll radio via the adoption of the Top 40 surveys as the main source for programming. Payola didn't go away – the practice continued, with program directors and music directors hopping aboard the gravy train too.

When the smoke cleared, the principal casualty of all the hubbub was Freed, whose descent from fame and fortune was swift and unforgiving. The hard-drinking Freed had made more than his share of enemies with his brash attitude over the years, and job offers eventually dried up. He had relocated to southern California a few years before uremic poisoning killed him on 20 January 1965 at age 43.

Happily, ASCAP never did get its wish. Despite the organisation's scurrilous behind-the-scenes campaign, rock and roll was here to stay. ✶

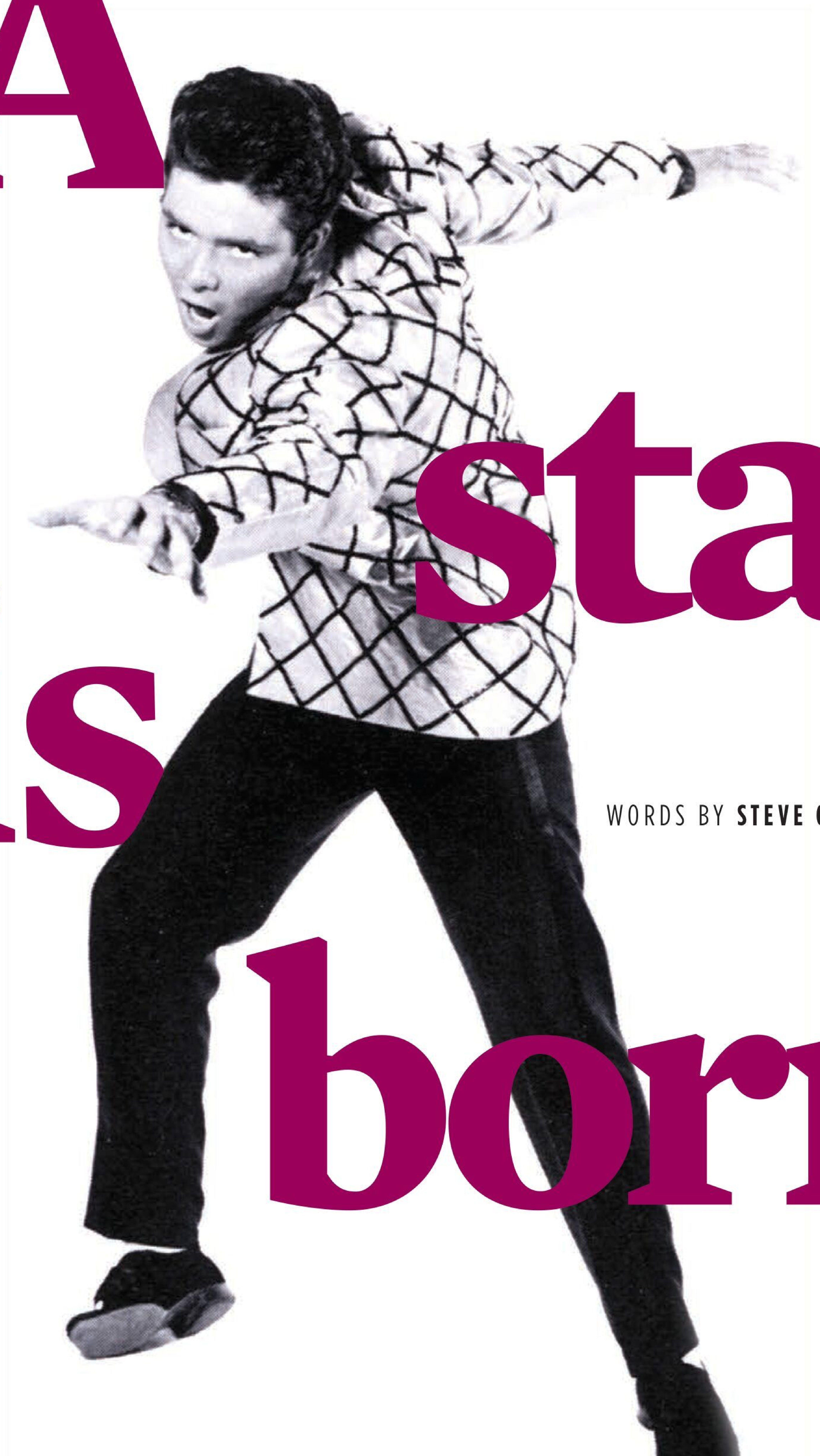
LOVE MUSIC?

JERRY LEE LEWIS
STEVIE WONDER SPECIAL EDITION
ROCKABILLY
THE NEW ROMANTICS
PET SHOP BOYS
BTS
SYNTHPOP
THE BEATLES VINYL BUYER'S BIBLE
HARRY STYLES
GEORGE MICHAEL
THE ELVIS YEARS
THE BEATLES YEARS VOL.2
DEPECHE MODE
ELTON JOHN SPECIAL EDITION
TAYLOR
BTS ANNUAL 2020
BLACKPINK
KYLIE SPECIAL EDITION
DURAN DURAN

DISCOVER A WORLD OF MUSIC – FILLED WITH EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS, RARE PHOTOS, CLASSIC ALBUMS, FASHION, COLLABORATIONS AND MUCH MORE!

Order your copy today from
anthem-publishing.com/musicspecials

A star is born



© Getty

WORDS BY **STEVE O'BRIEN**

In 1959, Cliff Richard starred in a movie that would soon be considered a British classic, a gritty and cynical satire of the pop music business titled *Expresso Bongo*...

The tropes of the 50s British teen movie are so embedded in popular culture that when Harry Enfield sent them up in his 1989 comedy *Norbert Smith: A Life*, they felt instantly familiar. Of course it was always easy to mock these knocked-off exploitation flicks, with their patently over-age teenage leads and clunky kidspeak ("What ya talkin' about, Daddy-o?"). But *Expresso Bongo* remains a cut above. Admittedly, there's little original about its story – a struggling music agent discovers a young, good looking singer and vows to make him a star – but Val Guest's film not only fizzes with period flavour but boasts arguably Cliff Richard's finest big-screen performance, as the bequiffed bongo player Bert Rudge (later remonikered Bongo Herbert).

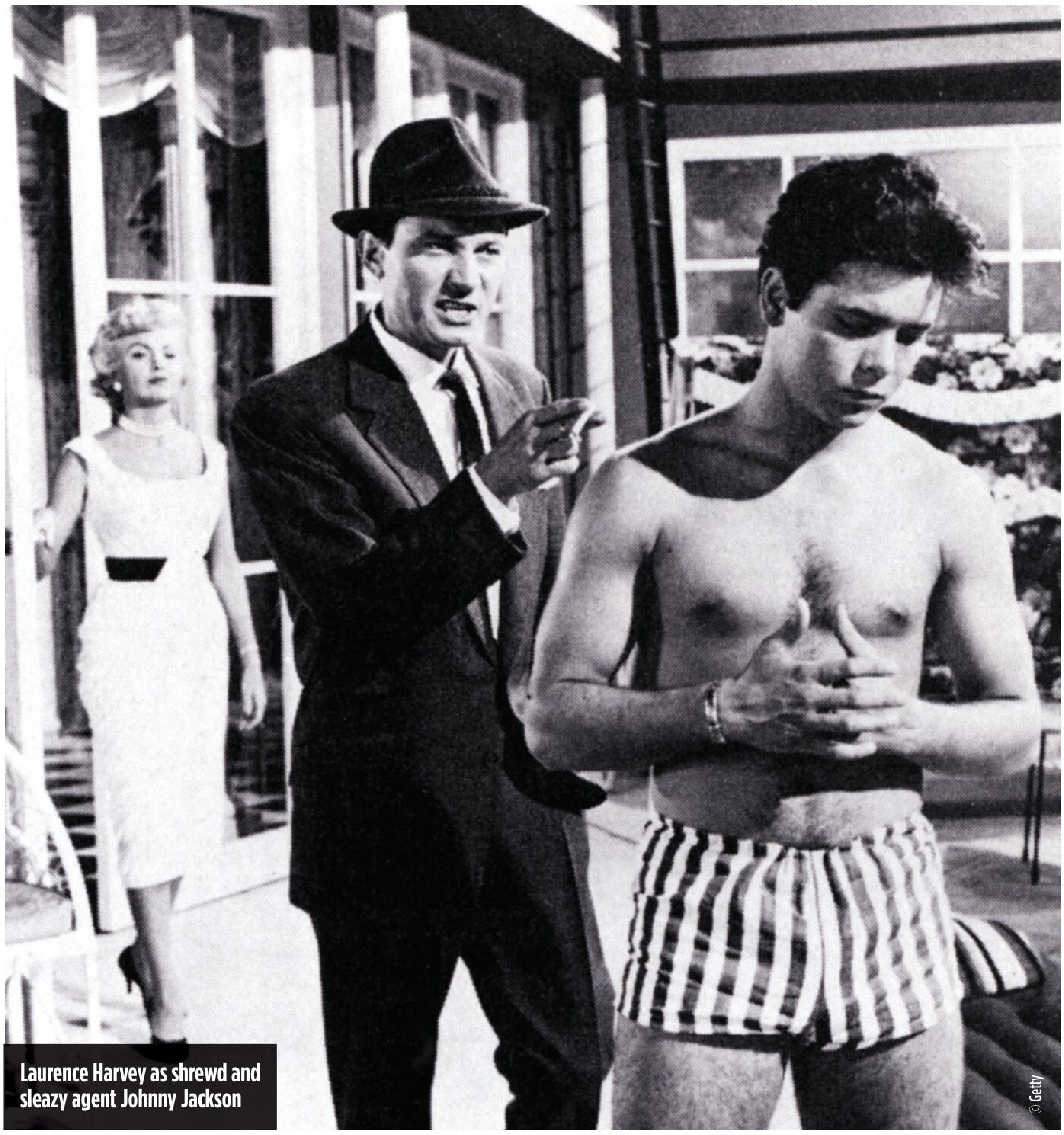
That *Expresso Bongo* was based on a successful play, by the writer Wolf Mankowitz, automatically elevated it above more throwaway rock'n'roll fare. Mankowitz had a knack for penning whip-smart dialogue and his play was widely seen as a piercing satire of the showbusiness scene, not something that coldly exploited it. It had premiered at London's Saville Theatre on 23 April 1958 and headlined a young Paul Scofield as showbiz agent Johnny Jackson, winning, despite its relatively short West End run, rapturous reviews, with *Variety* voting it Best British Musical of '58.

Such was the fuss over *Expresso Bongo* that, in 1959, British Lion bid for the rights to turn it into a movie, inking Val Guest, who'd helped shepherd *Quatermass* to the big screen, as director. As well as being a reliable hand behind the camera, Guest was also a skilled writer, having penned many of Will Hay's most popular comedies, and, working alongside Mankowitz, was instrumental in giving *Expresso Bongo* a full-blooded cinematic makeover.

Guest had considered keeping Schofield for the movie, but eventually opted for the 31-year-old Laurence Harvey. 1959 would prove to be a breakout year for the Lithuanian-born, South Africa-raised actor, who bagged another critically acclaimed role, that of ambitious young accountant Joe Lampton, in kitchen sink masterpiece *Room At The Top*. Harvey would prove adroit casting as the maverick Jackson. The actor would often talk of being considered a 'cocky intruder' by the British theatrical establishment. Though he'd lost his South African accent during his years at RADA, he was forever reminded that he was an immigrant, and it's that sense of not quite belonging that he brings to the part. The character of Johnny Jackson had been modelled – clearly, for anyone in the know – on pop svengali Larry Parnes, even down to the gaudy pseudonym Jackson bestows upon his teenage protege. However, the broad Jewish accent that Harvey adopts in the film was based more on its co-writer Wolf Mankowitz than the similarly Jewish Parnes. Guest had arranged a series of lunches between Harvey and Mankowitz, so the actor could study the writer's voice.

"I think I have it," Harvey told Guest after the second meet-up, instructing the director to warn him if his accent wandered during the shoot. One day it did, and Harvey was forced to phone Mankowitz, just to get himself back on track. After a few minutes, he hung up and told Guest, "Okay, better roll before I forget it!"

"I don't think [Wolf] ever realised," reflected Val Guest in his 2001 autobiography *So You Want To Be In Pictures*, "that when Laurence Harvey ➡


Laurence Harvey as shrewd and sleazy agent Johnny Jackson

© Getty

Sylvia Syms, Cliff Richard and Laurence Harvey on the set at Shepperton Studios

© Getty

won critical kudos for his performance as Johnny Jackson, he won them partly for sounding like Wolf Mankowitz."

One significant difference between the stage version of *Expresso Bongo* and the film was that, in the play, Bongo Herbert is depicted as having few singing skills (Mankowitz was intent on painting the showbiz game as being deplorably superficial, valuing cheekbones over talent). For the movie, Guest wanted someone plausible and authentic as the teenager who's plucked from coffee-shop obscurity to become a rock'n'roll pin-up. He considered using one of the names from Parnes' own stable, including Tommy Steele ("he didn't have the vulnerability") and Marty Wilde ("too tall to command the necessary sympathy").

Then a call came from the 2i's coffee bar. Guest was told about a singer who might just be the perfect fit for Bert. The director journeyed down to 59 Old Compton Street and watched a teenager named Cliff Richard and his backing band The Drifters mesmerise the espresso-supping throng. Guest offered Cliff the part on the spot, and arranged for him to sign the £2,000 contract. With the singer still underage, he brought his mum to the signing.

"Can my mates be in it too?" the bold 17-year-old asked the director, and with that The Drifters, or The Shadows as they would soon be re-monickered, took their big -screen bow.

It wasn't Cliff's first acting part (he'd made a small appearance in a film earlier in 1959 titled *Serious Charge*), but *Expresso Bongo* – in which he was fourth billed – would be the role that announced him to the world.

However impressive Cliff is in the part, it's Harvey that dominates the film. Though *Expresso Bongo* is about the emerging counter culture and the rock'n'roll explosion, it's very much seen and judged through the eyes of the grown-ups. Despite that, it offers an authentic glimpse into how youth culture was represented at the time. In one scene, the real-life figure of Gilbert Harding, presenting on TV, screens a clip of Bert playing, before cutting to a line-up of crusty middle-aged establishment figures who attempt to explain this new-fangled pop phenomenon.

© Getty

"Now, doctor, would you say that this is a healthy sign of high spirits?" Harding asks Patrick Cargill's besuited psychiatrist.

"It's not as simple as that," the doctor replies. "Adolescence in our time demands outlets for their frustrations. The drums Bongo beats may stand for someone he doesn't like. Or they may be a simple means of evacuating tension."

The film then cuts to a bemused looking Bongo sitting at home watching the debate. "What's all that about?!" he exclaims.

Yet for all the sidelining of the movie's striplings, its venom is targeted at the middle-aged exploiters of the new sound. The record producer Gus Mayer openly admits he loathes the music he makes, while even Cliff's character appears to be contaminated by the cynicism of his elders: "It's a bastard world and I'm a fully paid-up member." Bongo, who starts off as likeable and relatable, becomes increasingly sneery, and by its end is so contemptuous of his fans he refers to them as "grimy yobs". In fact, the most sympathetic characters in the movie are both female: firstly Jackson's stripper girlfriend, Maisie (played by Sylvia Syms) and Yolande Donlan as Dixie Collins, a middle-aged American singer struggling with irrelevance.

Expresso Bongo premiered on 20 November 1959 to generally positive reviews. Three years later, with Cliff Richard now a major star, it was re-released in a brutally cut-down version, one which, by excising many of Harvey and Syms' musical numbers, refocused it as a Cliff flick, along the lines of *The Young Ones*. If you want to compare and contrast the two versions, the BFI have helpfully included both on their most recent Blu-ray release.

Looking at *Expresso Bongo* now, 62 years on, it's a cherishable time capsule, offering up an intoxicating brew of espresso bars, amusement arcades and sleazy strip joints. Take special notice, when you slip in that disc, of the innovative opening sequence, where Guest's camera prowls the streets of Soho at night, its title cards springing up on pinball machines, in jukeboxes and, for the 'Written by Wolf Mankowitz' credit, the man himself wearing a sandwich board.

It's a movie that feels thrillingly seedy, at a time when many British movies were almost comically wholesome. To have one of its primary characters be a stripper, and to showcase so many striptease routines (though there's no actual nudity in the film, there's plenty of exposed flesh) made *Expresso Bongo* something of a *cause célèbre* at the time.

It wasn't Cliff's first acting part, but *Expresso Bongo* would be the role that announced him to the world

What's especially fascinating about *Expresso Bongo* is that it captures London at the cusp of a new decade, and reminds us just how rapidly the entertainment industry pounced on the emerging rock'n'roll sound. And while similarly plotted American movies, such as *A Star Is Born*, were set among the glitz and glamour of New York's Broadway, *Expresso Bongo* takes place in the squalid underbelly of late-50s London. Guest had a talent for giving his movies an unvarnished verisimilitude (just see his bleak sci-fi drama *The Day The Earth Caught Fire*, made just two years later, or his double bill of *Quatermass* horrors) and *Expresso Bongo* throbs with a sense of documentary-like realism, not just of the London of the time, but for how youth culture is represented. When the movie visits the Tom Tom Club (an obvious avatar for the 2i's coffee bar), it's populated by a motley collection of rock'n'rollers, beatniks and hepcats. It never feels as if this movie was written and directed by two men in their thirties and forties (Val Guest was 48 at the time).

While its songs may not be up to much, watch it for Cliff, watch it for Laurence Harvey's playful turn as Johnny Jackson and watch it for its never-bettered snapshot of nocturnal London's neon-drenched streets. In the 1950s, America had *Rock Around The Clock* and *Blackboard Jungle*. In 1959, we had *Expresso Bongo*. ✶

Living Doll

By the time *Expresso Bongo* was released in the last months of the 50s, Cliff Richard had dropped what would become the biggest single of 1959, *Living Doll*. With The Drifters, he'd enjoyed several Top 10 hits but it was *Living Doll* that really established Cliff as Britain's answer to Elvis. When the song was installed in the film *Serious Charge* as a musical badge of cool intended to attract that Soho set, the band weren't to know it was soon to become their meal ticket. Lionel Bart's rockin' tale of an animated mannequin had become a very different animal, however, by the time Cliff stepped up to the mic at Abbey Road to record it. The original uptempo film version was slowed down, and the snappy beat completely removed. With its appeal now widened, and the band happy, the resulting 'country song' was a surefire hit.

THE TOUR FROM HELL

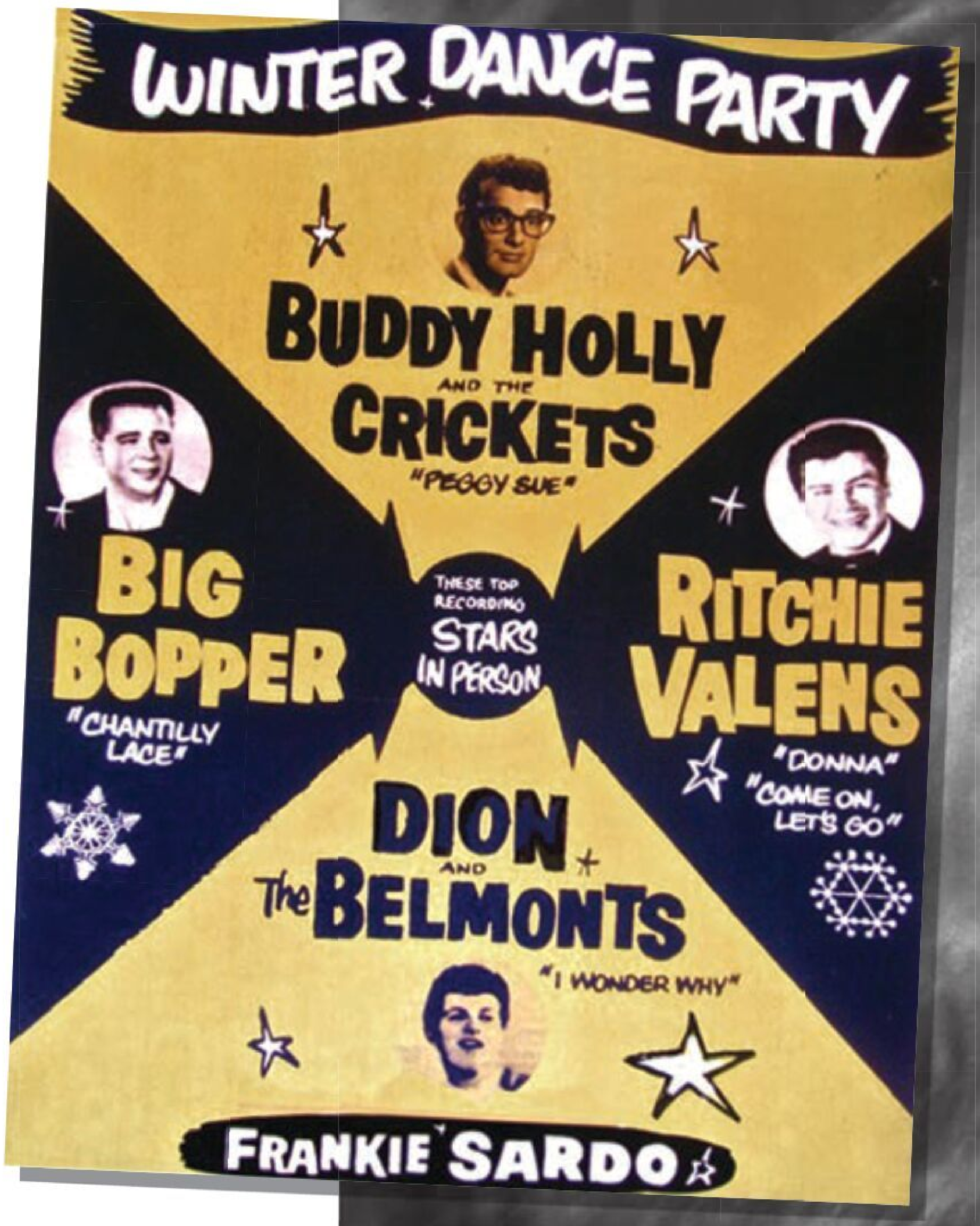
When Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper set off on a chilly tour in January 1959, no one suspected it would spell the end of an era...

WORDS BY **RANDY FOX**

On 3 February 1959, Jerry Dwyer's small plane left the runway of the Mason City, Iowa airport. It was a clear, beautiful Tuesday morning, but Dwyer was on a grim mission. Filled with foreboding, he immediately began scanning the ground below him. A little over eight hours earlier, slightly before one o'clock in the morning, Dwyer had watched a Beechcraft Bonanza owned by his charter flight company depart from the same airport.

The small, four-seater plane was piloted by 21-year-old Roger Peterson, and carried three passengers – rock'n'roll singers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and JP Richardson, aka The Big Bopper. After leaving the field, the plane levelled off and made a 180 degree left turn, heading to the northwest and its planned destination of Fargo, North Dakota. The musicians were due to perform in nearby Moorhead, Minnesota on the evening of 3 February, and the plane had been chartered to avoid a long, cold and tedious bus ride over icy roads.

Despite moderate wind gusts and snow, the takeoff was flawless. Dwyer watched the tail light of the plane as it receded from sight. About four miles from the field, the plane appeared to descend, almost as if heading for a landing, but given the snowfall and


WINTER DANCE PARTY
BUDDY HOLLY AND THE CRICKETS
"PEGGY SUE"
BIG BOPPER
"CHANTILLY LACE"
THESE TOP RECORDING STARS IN PERSON
RITCHIE VALENS
"DONNA"
"COME ON, LET'S GO"
DION AND The BELMONTS
"I WONDER WHY"
FRANKIE SARDO

© James McCool and Seyan Garabedian. Photographer Mary Gerber

NOW
THE NEW KRIB 1490 ON YOUR DIAL

Buddy and the new Crickets – with Waylon Jennings on bass and Tommy Allsup on guitar – in one of the last-ever photos of Holly from the final show, 2 February 1959

© Donna Fischer Doffing

16-year-old fan Donna Fischer Doffing took this snap of Valens with Jennings and Allsup in Milwaukee on January 23

the angle of the turn, that its apparent descent was surely an optical illusion.

By daybreak, Dwyer was less sure it had been an illusion. Shortly after the plane departed, he had attempted to reach Peterson by radio, without response. The radio silence continued throughout the whole night. By the next morning, Peterson was sure something was wrong. The plane had not arrived in Fargo, and an alert was issued for the missing aircraft. Taking matters into his own hands, Dwyer decided to follow the most likely flightpath and see what he could find.

Just a few minutes after takeoff, at approximately 9.35a.m. local time, Dwyer spotted the wreckage in a nearby cornfield. It was obvious the plane had hit the ground at a high rate of speed, as the main fuselage was a tangled ball of metal, wood and fabric resting against a barbed wire fence, while bits of debris and bodies were strewn across the field.

ELEVEN DAYS EARLIER, the Winter Dance Party tour had kicked off on 23 January 1959 with a show in George Devine's Ballroom in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Rock'n'roll tours were a genuine rarity in the Midwest, and the enthusiasm of the audience proved to be overwhelming. But Buddy Holly and the four other featured acts – Ritchie Valens, The Big Bopper, Dion and the Belmonts, and Frankie Sardo – knew they had a hard road stretching ahead of them. Travelling through the flat, frozen plains of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa during the harshest months of the winter would be a difficult task under any circumstances, but the booking agency, General Artists Corporation (GAC), had seemingly given little or no thought to geography while planning the tour. Rather than follow a logical path from city to nearby city, the tour instead would zig-zag its way between distant locations, guaranteeing gruelling all-night rides in bare-bones buses over icy and dangerous two-lane highways.

Despite these challenges, Holly had little choice in signing on for the tour. In November 1958, he announced he was moving to New York and would no longer work with the Clovis, New Mexico-based producer Norman Petty. Holly and Petty had enjoyed a successful partnership for almost two years, scoring hit after hit. But as time progressed, Holly came to suspect that all

A MISSED PHONE CALL

THE REUNION THAT NEVER WAS

As Buddy Holly was playing for an eager and enthusiastic audience in Clear Lake, Iowa, over 1000 miles away, some of his old friends were discussing plans for the future. Holly had split with The Crickets in November 1958. The remaining members, Jerry Allison and Joe B. Mauldin, recruited long-time friend Sonny Curtis, who previously backed and recorded with Holly in 1956.

Through the months that followed, The Crickets worked in Norman Petty's studio, eventually cutting two songs for a potential single with vocalist Earl Sinks. But Petty showed little urgency in sending the master tapes to New York for release and also displayed an open animosity to Curtis' role in the revised line-up. Frustrated at their lack of progress with Petty, Allison, Curtis, and Maudlin decided to call Holly and suggest a possible reunion.

As Maudlin recalled to writer John Goldrosen, "We started trying to get in touch with Buddy because he had said: 'You ever want to get back together with me, then all you have to do is call.'"

After first trying to reach Holly at his New York apartment, the trio called the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa. By the time of their call, the show was over and Holly had already left for the airport – ending the chance for what could have been a magnificent reunion.

357-9078
OPERATOR
READ BEFORE DEPOSITING COIN
LOCAL CALLS
OPERATOR CALLS

ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

The payphone at the Surf in Clear Lake, used by Holly to call his wife

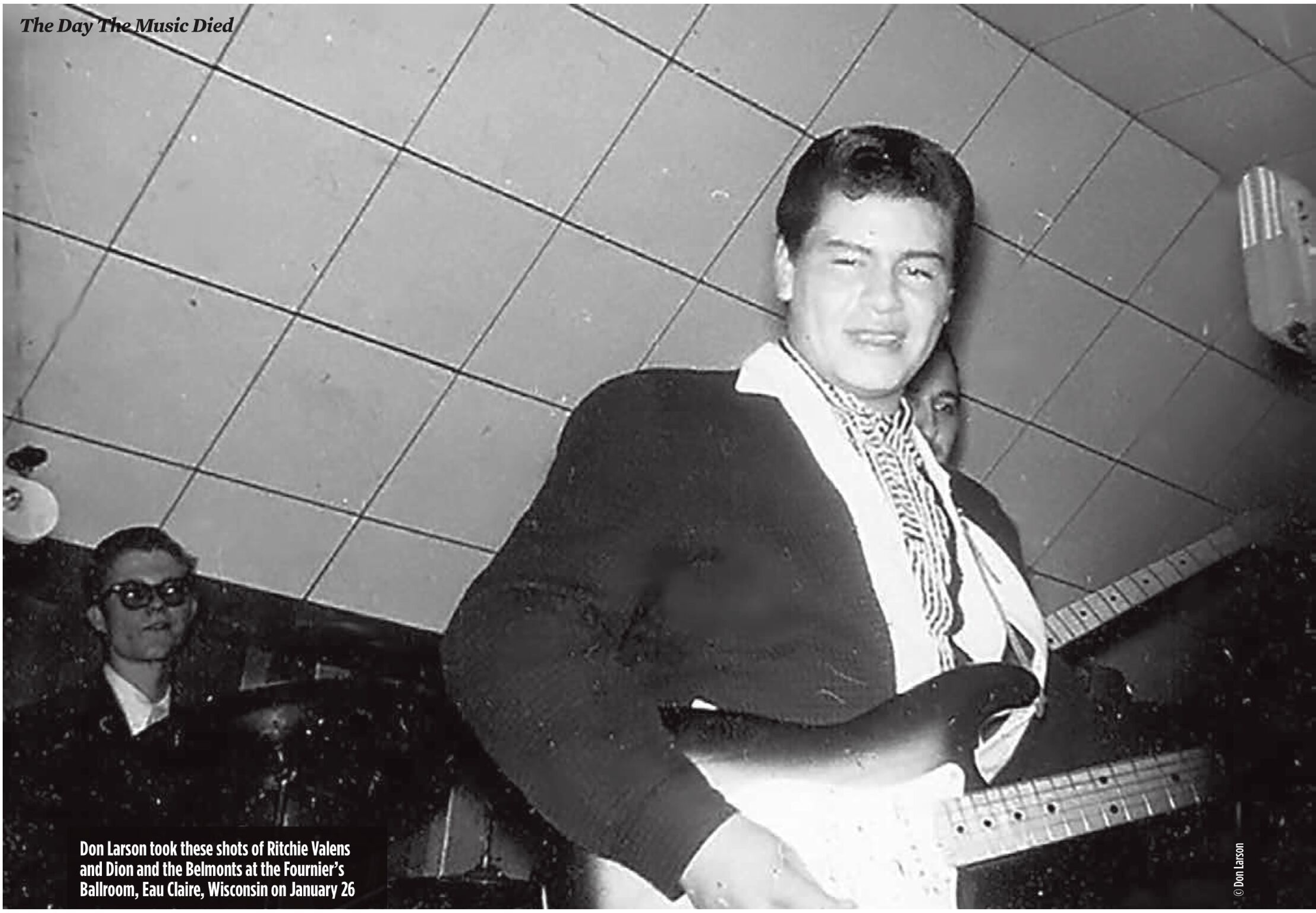
Having moved to New York, Buddy had some publicity shots taken by fashion and celebrity photographer Bruno

© John Beecher

was not well with his share of recording and songwriting royalties. The legal actions following the split led to Petty freezing all royalty payments to Holly. By January 1959, Holly was finding himself low on ready cash, and the offer to headline the Winter Dance Party tour offered the chance for some much-needed income.

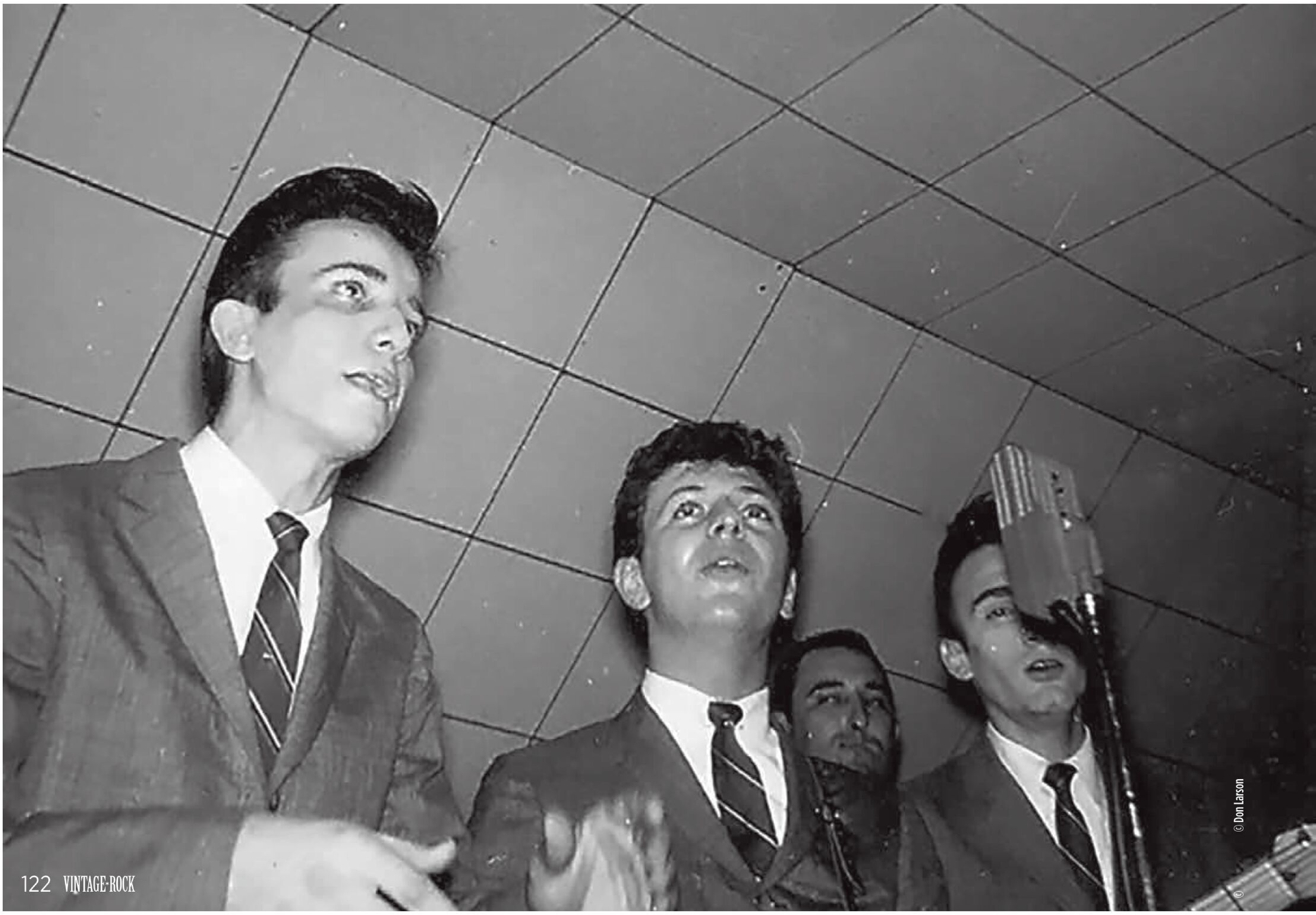
Holly's past experience on GAC package tours had been mostly pleasant, but times had changed for the rock'n'roll tour circuit. Rock'n'roll shows were simply not as profitable as they had been just a few years earlier. GAC badly needed to cut costs, and their performers' comfort was where the axe fell.

The budget cuts were obvious to everyone who embarked on the tour. The performers were required to travel without a road crew, and were forced to load and unload their own equipment at each stop. Even worse,



Don Larson took these shots of Ritchie Valens and Dion and the Belmonts at the Fournier's Ballroom, Eau Claire, Wisconsin on January 26

© Don Larson



© Don Larson

they were required to travel in cheap, second-hand school buses ill-equipped for the harsh road conditions and freezing temperatures, often traversing more than 300 miles of icy roads in a single night.

Within days the performers had worked their way through several replacement buses as they experienced breakdowns, severe lack of heat, and sleepless, all-night rides on the chilly and uncomfortable coaches. By the end of the first week, the performers were exhausted, and none had come at all prepared for the weather. Holly and Richardson were from Texas, and Valens was from Southern California, where freezing temperatures were a rarity. Even the New Yorkers, Dion and the Belmonts and Frankie Sardo, were underdressed for the sub-zero temperatures. The Winter Dance Party quickly received a new name, "the tour from hell".

Ritchie Valens with fan Donna Fischer Doffing at the Milwaukee show. Valens enjoyed the fact that she shared a name with his hit record

© Donna Fischer Doffing

AFTER REPORTING THE location of the crash, Jerry Dwyer turned his plane back towards the Mason City Airport, landed, then hurried to his car to drive to the crash site. When he arrived, the police were already on the scene. It quickly became obvious that as the plane crashed, the right wing had struck the ground first, ripping it away. The remainder of the plane had cartwheeled across the field for 500 yards, crumpling the fuselage before coming to rest at a woven-wire fence.

Crash investigators later estimated the plane was travelling at 170mph when it hit the ground. The bodies of Holly, Valens, and Richardson had been flung clear of the plane as it tumbled across the field, with Holly's and Valens' bodies lying 20 feet south of the main wreckage and Richardson's body 40 feet beyond the fence row. The body of pilot Roger Peterson was found crushed in the wreckage. All four men died on impact.

FOR HOLLY THE turning point on the tour from hell came in the early morning hours of 1 February. On the evening of 31 January, the Winter Dance Party tour rocked the National Guard Armory in Duluth, Minnesota. Despite the hardships, the performers gave their all for each performance. Over 58 years later, one attendee, Bob Dylan – a high school student at the time – recalled Holly's performance in his 2017 Nobel Prize lecture. "He looked me right straight dead in the eye, and he transmitted something," Dylan said. "Something, I didn't know what. And it gave me the chills."

But the performance provided little comfort once they had traipsed back out to the freezing bus. They'd been on the road for only a few hours when the vehicle slowed and came to a complete stop. With heavy snow falling and temperatures dipping to 35 below zero, the musicians found themselves stranded on a lonely stretch of highway in the wilds of northern Wisconsin.

While several of the musicians began burning newspapers in an effort to stay warm, Carl Bunch, Holly's drummer, was having difficulty moving his legs and the pain in his feet was becoming intense. In the dim light, guitarist Tommy Allsup examined Bunch's feet, which had turned a disturbing shade of brown.

'By the end of the first week the performers were exhausted, and none had come prepared for the weather'

FRANKIE SARDO

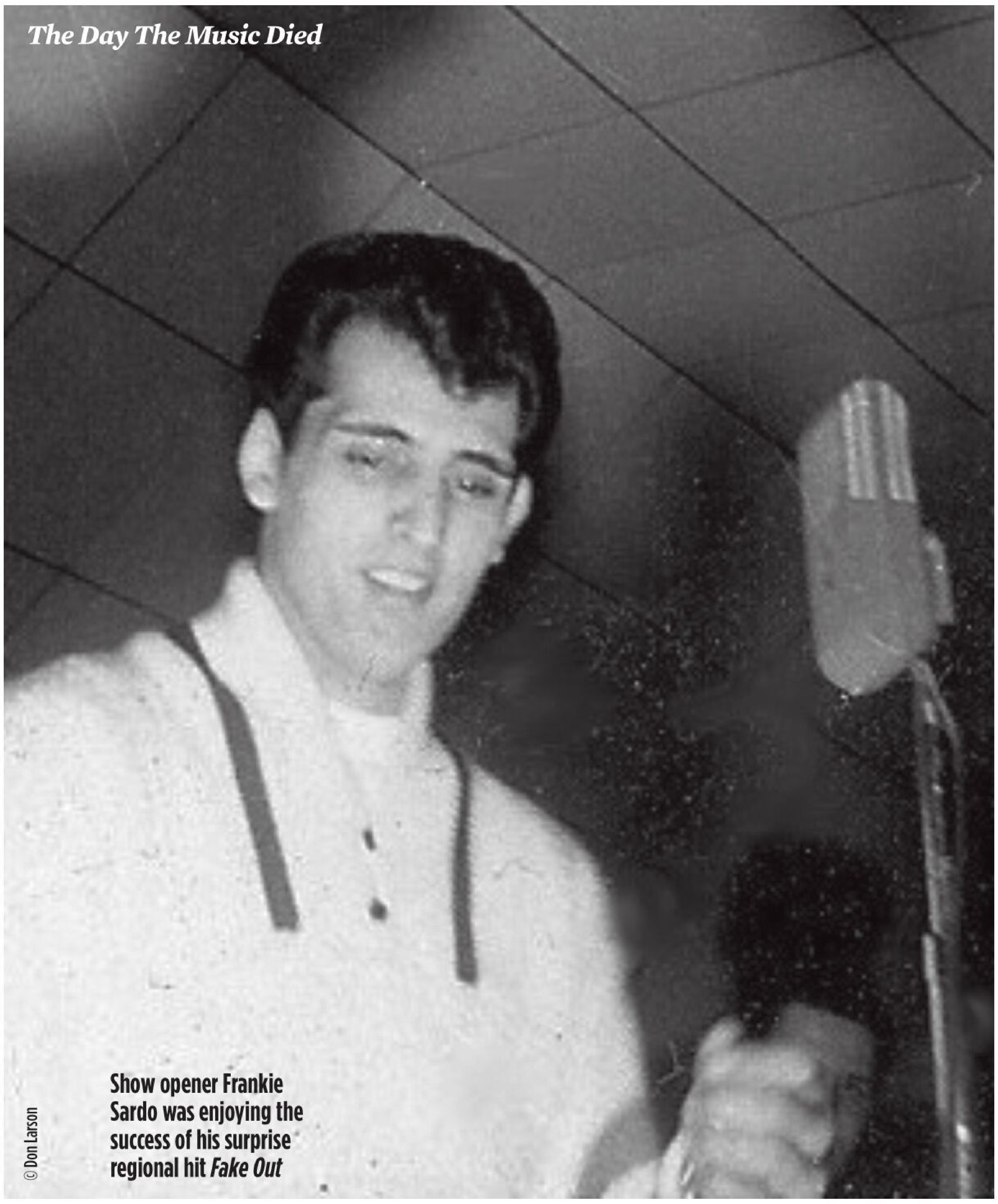
THE OTHER WINTER DANCE PARTY STAR

In comparison to Dion and of course the big names that lost their lives that night, relatively little is said about the Winter Dance Party opening act, Frankie Sardo. Sardo died in 2014, but fortunately the genial Brooklyn-born singer relayed his memories of the tour to Jim McCool and Sevan Garabedian in 2010.

"I ended up on this tour… it wasn't the first one I did, but it was the last," said Sardo. "I'd met Dion, and Buddy, and I knew Waylon. I'd just lived through the [Korean] war, what did I care? I was just having fun!

"Buddy had a great sense of humour. Most cowboys do! We all joked, sang, played poker. We'd meet with the fans all the time – no separation. If anybody had played the star routine, they'd have been thrown off the bus!

"It was the bus breaking down a second time at Clear Lake that did it. Buddy said. 'Screw it, let's get a plane.' When the crash came, I could not adjust to it. That flight was just a hop, skip and a jump… I'd jumped out of planes in combat! We found out at the next hotel lobby. We cried, called our families… total shock. We decided to carry on, as a tribute. We sang their numbers. I did *La Bamba*. You see… I was never a rock star. But Buddy, he would have ended up a writer, an A&R man, like Clive Davis. He LOVED music. He would have had a life in the business."



Show opener Frankie Sardo was enjoying the success of his surprise regional hit *Fake Out*

© Don Larson

Finally, a deputy sheriff arrived on the scene and called for additional patrol cars that ferried the dangerously hypothermic musicians to Hurley, Wisconsin on the Wisconsin/Michigan border where they were able to get a few hours of warm sleep in a hotel. The situation was more dire for Carl Bunch. Diagnosed with a severe case of frostbite, he was admitted to the hospital in nearby Ironwood, Michigan, where he spent the next several days recovering. A scheduled matinee show in Appleton, Wisconsin was cancelled, but the assembled musicians continued on to Green Bay, Wisconsin in the relative comfort of a Greyhound bus for an evening performance at the Riverside Ballroom.

The next day, 2 February, had been scheduled as an official day off, but a call from New York ruined any hope for rest and relaxation. Hoping to wring every possible nickel from the tour, a last-minute booking had been arranged at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa – and it was 350 miles away. Holly and the rest had little choice, and boarded yet another second-hand school bus for the long trip west. "Surely," Holly thought, "there has to be a better way to travel."

AS POLICE AND emergency calls about the crash filled the airwaves of Clear Lake and Mason City, a nearby radio station picked up on the reports while monitoring police calls. As soon as the first identification of the bodies was reported, the station began running announcements of the crash, as well as submitting the story to national wire services.

Initial announcements were short on details; many reported Buddy Holly's death along with unidentified "members of his band". At least part of this early confusion was caused by the discovery of Tommy Allsup's wallet lying in the debris. The night before, Allsup had given Holly his wallet so he could use the identification to pick up a registered letter waiting for Allsup in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Surf Ballroom manager Carroll Anderson was called to make an identification of the bodies, and shortly afterwards corrected news reports went out over the wire services and the story was broadcast coast-to-coast over radio and television stations. No consideration was given to the families and friends of the victims. Maria Elena Holly would endure the shock of learning of her husband's death through her television. Allsup spotted a picture of The Big Bopper on TV as he entered the Moorhead hotel; only when he spoke to the check-in desk did he realise the terrible truth.

BY THE TIME the bus arrived in Clear Lake, Iowa, Holly was fed up. They were exhausted and cold, and with no time to have laundry done the look and smell of his band's clothing was becoming repulsive. As Waylon Jennings recalled in his 1996 autobiography: "We'd change in the dressing room, go on, get all sweated up, and then run back to the bus. We tried to hang our wrinkled suits in the aisle, and after a while, it got kind of ripe in there. We all smelled like goats."

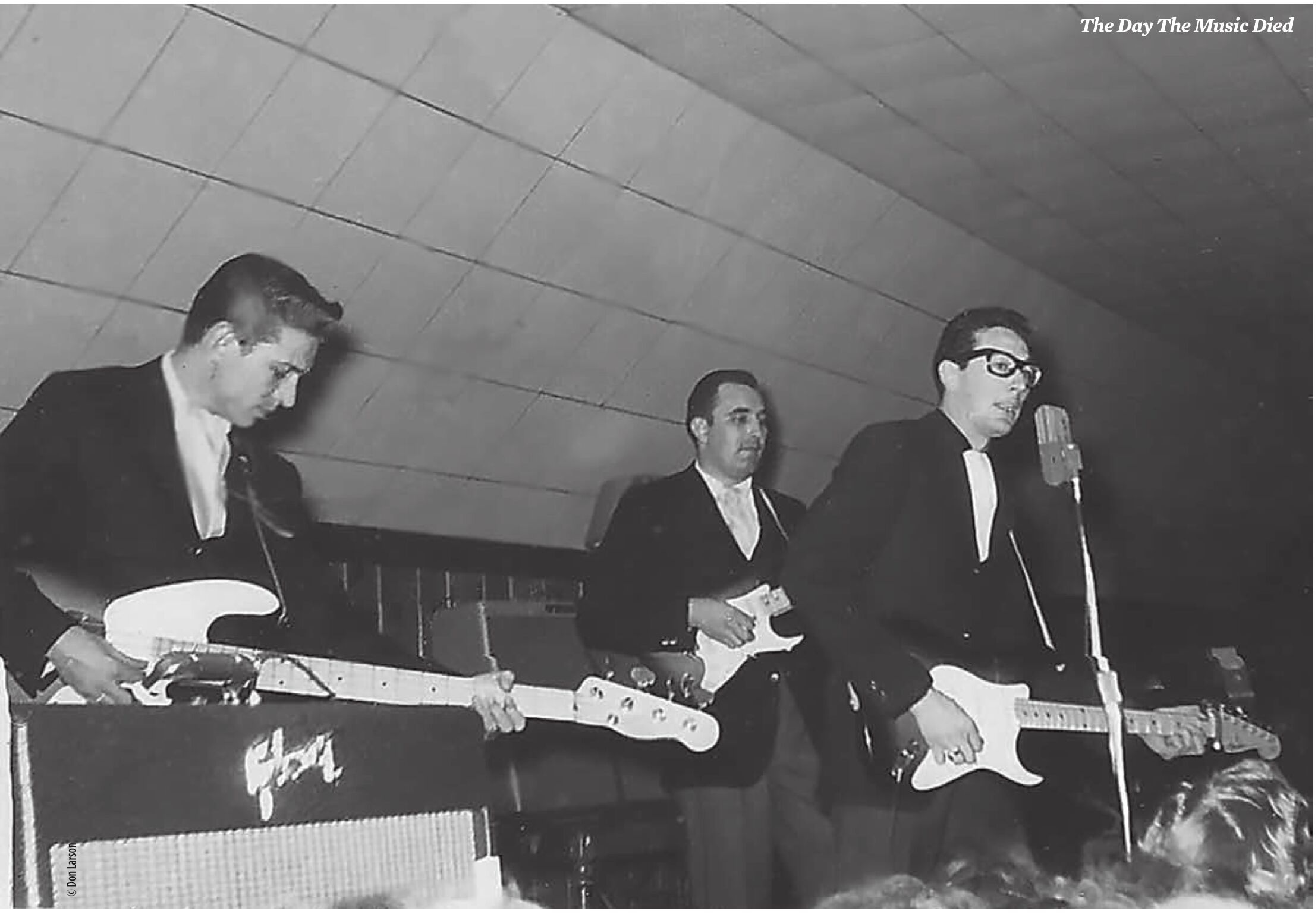
On the way to Clear Lake, Holly suggested chartering a plane to fly himself, Allsup and Jennings to the next stop in Moorhead, Minnesota. It would give them time to get some sleep, take a bath, have their clothes laundered, and make arrangements for the following show. Allsup and Jennings agreed, and after arriving at Clear Lake, Holly asked Carroll Anderson to make the arrangements with the nearby airport in Mason City, Iowa.

During the show, JP Richardson heard about the plan. As The Big Bopper was over six feet tall and weighed more than 250lbs, attempting to sleep on the tiny bus seats was agony for him. Furthermore, he was coming down with a bad case of the flu. Desperate to avoid more bus travel, he had little problem convincing Jennings to give up his seat. Ritchie Valens, equally keen, tried the same tactic with Allsup. The two tossed a coin, with Valens winning the coveted spot.

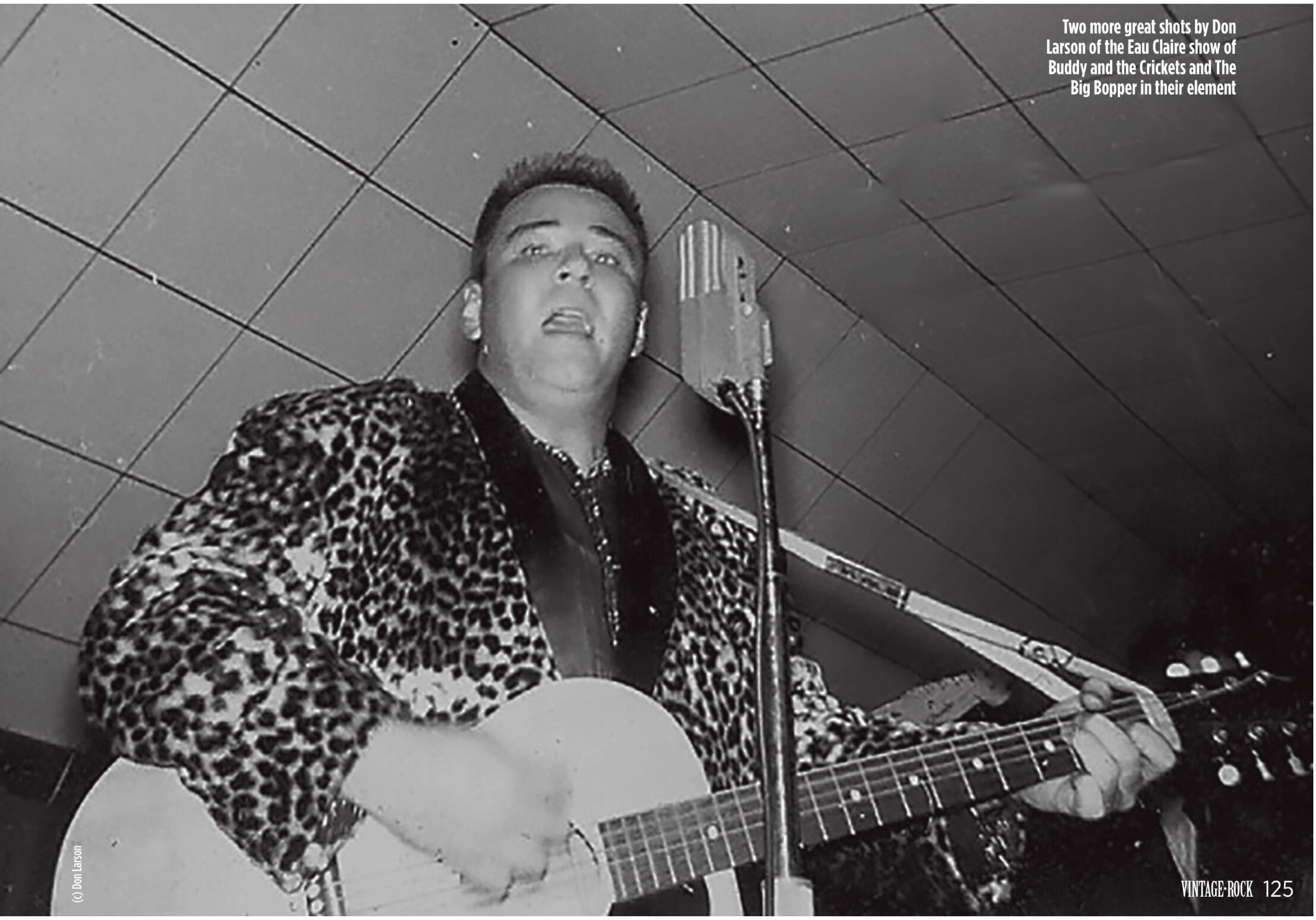
SOMETIME DURING THE evening, Holly made a call to Maria Elena. As she later recalled to John Goldrosen: "He told me what an awful tour it had been… everybody on the tour was really disgusted with the whole thing. He said the tour was behind schedule, and he had to go on ahead to the next stop to make arrangements for the show. He didn't tell me that he was going to fly. I said: 'Why should you go ahead?' And he said, 'There's nobody else to do it.'"

Holly, Richardson and Valens arrived at the ➡

'Hoping to wring every nickel from the tour, a last-minute booking had been arranged at the Surf Ballroom'

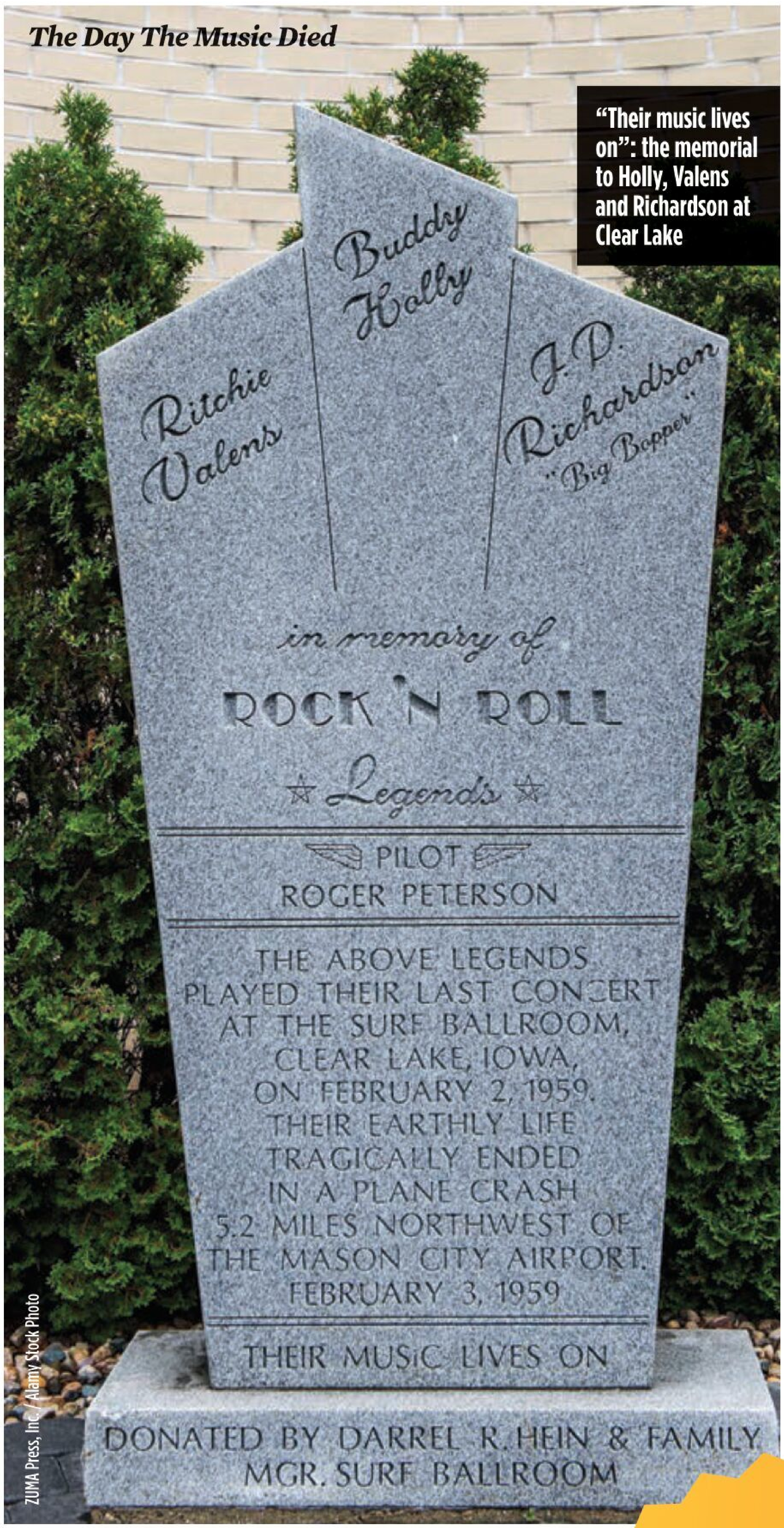


© Don Larson



Two more great shots by Don Larson of the Eau Claire show of Buddy and the Crickets and The Big Bopper in their element

(c) Don Larson


Buddy Holly
Ritchie Valens
J.P. Richardson "Big Bopper"
in memory of
ROCK 'N ROLL
Legends
PILOT
ROGER PETERSON
THE ABOVE LEGENDS PLAYED THEIR LAST CONCERT AT THE SURF BALLROOM, CLEAR LAKE, IOWA, ON FEBRUARY 2, 1959. THEIR EARTHLY LIFE TRAGICALLY ENDED IN A PLANE CRASH 5.2 MILES NORTHWEST OF THE MASON CITY AIRPORT, FEBRUARY 3, 1959
THEIR MUSIC LIVES ON
DONATED BY DARREL R. HEIN & FAMILY MGR. SURF BALLROOM

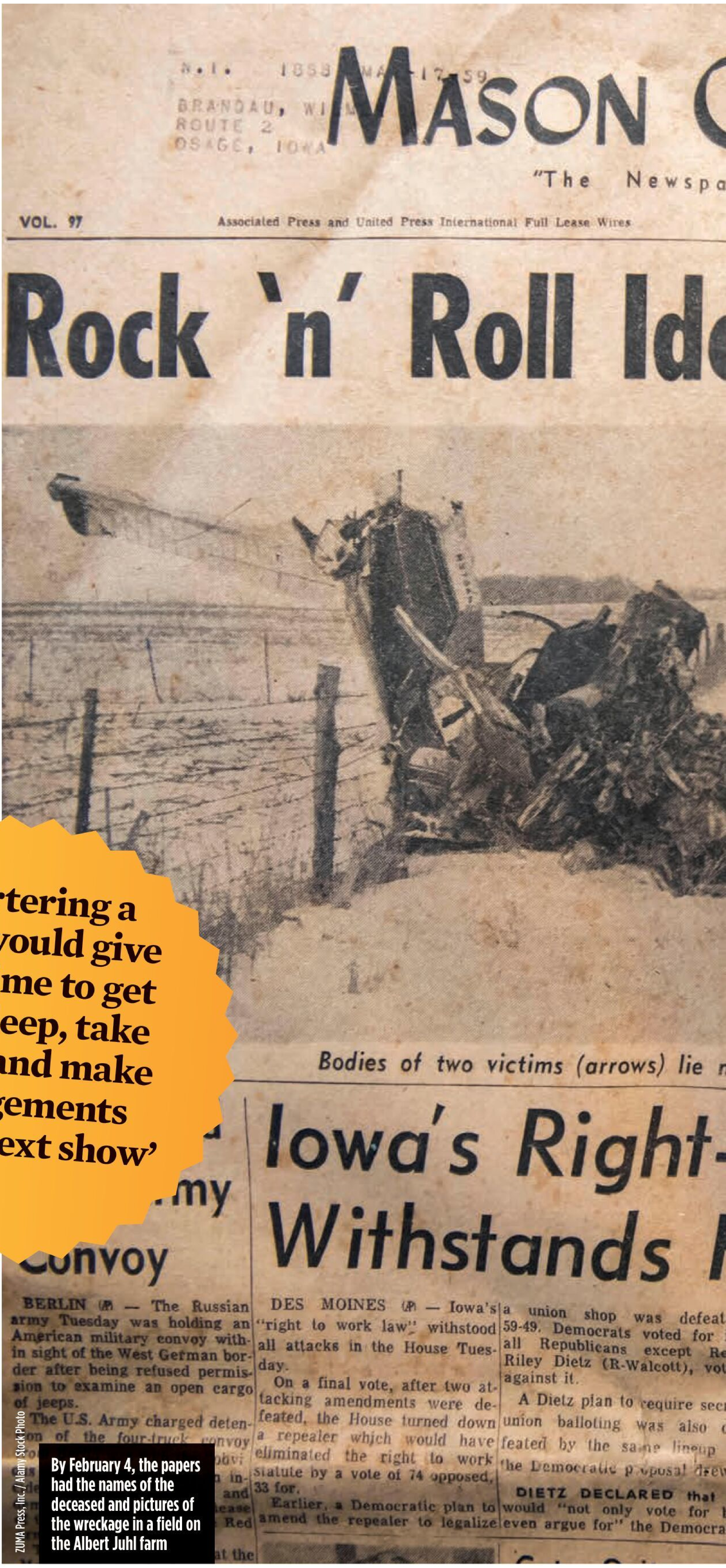
"Their music lives on": the memorial to Holly, Valens and Richardson at Clear Lake

ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

Mason City airport at 12.40am on 3 February. They were met by Jerry Dwyer, the owner of Dwyer's Flying Service, and pilot Roger Peterson. The forecasts for the night indicated excellent visibility of 10 miles or greater. With the temperature dipping to 18 degrees Fahrenheit and wind gusts of up to 35mph with light snowfall predicted, conditions were less than perfect but adequate for normal visual flight.

But Peterson had missed a weather advisory for lowered visibility due to fog and snow. This would necessitate flying by instruments – a skill he wasn't certified for. Also, the plane was equipped with an old-style attitude gyro which displayed the plane's bank and pitch in the opposite manner to more modern instruments. For a younger, less experienced pilot flying with no visibility, it meant one might believe the plane was climbing when it was descending. Unaware of these potential pitfalls, Holly, Richardson, and Valens stowed their luggage and climbed into their seats – relieved for a respite from the tour from hell and oblivious to the destiny that awaited them. ✶

> **'Chartering a plane would give them time to get some sleep, take a bath, and make arrangements for the next show'**



N.I. 1858 MA 17 59
BRANDAU, WI
ROUTE 2
OSAGE, IOWA

MASON

"The Newspa

VOL. 97 — Associated Press and United Press International Full Lease Wires

Rock 'n' Roll Id

Bodies of two victims (arrows) lie n

my
Convoy

BERLIN (AP) — The Russian army Tuesday was holding an American military convoy within sight of the West German border after being refused permission to examine an open cargo of jeeps.

The U.S. Army charged detention of the four-truck convoy

Iowa's Right-
Withstands

DES MOINES (AP) — Iowa's "right to work law" withstood all attacks in the House Tuesday.

On a final vote, after two attacking amendments were defeated, the House turned down a repealer which would have eliminated the right to work statute by a vote of 74 opposed, 33 for.

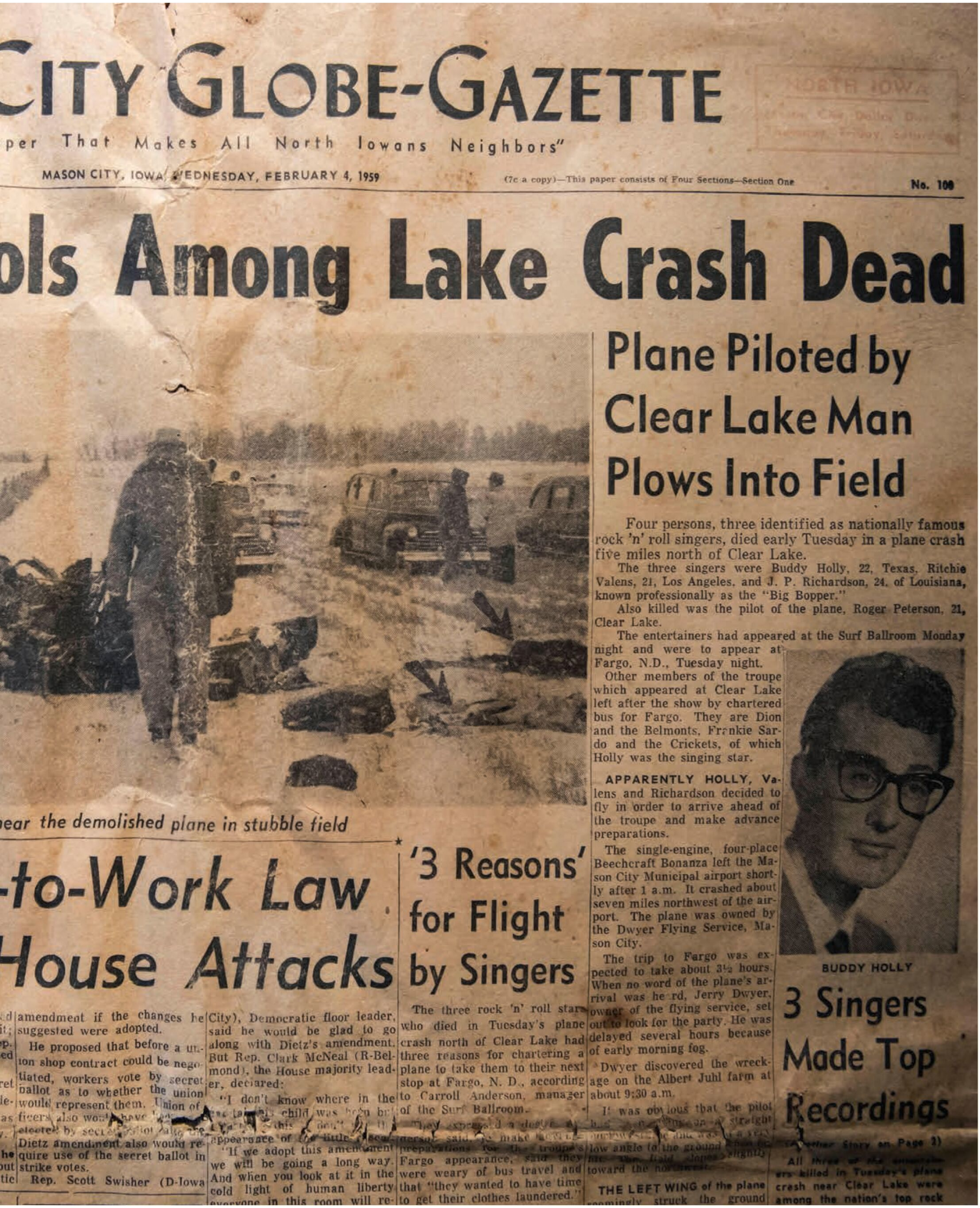
Earlier, a Democratic plan to amend the repealer to legalize
a union shop was defeat
59-49. Democrats voted for
all Republicans except Re
Riley Dietz (R-Walcott), vot
against it.

A Dietz plan to require sec
union balloting was also
feated by the same lineup
the Democratic proposal drew

DIETZ DECLARED that
would "not only vote for
even argue for" the Democra

By February 4, the papers had the names of the deceased and pictures of the wreckage in a field on the Albert Juhl farm

ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo



CITY GLOBE-GAZETTE

per That Makes All North Iowans Neighbors"

NORTH IOWA

MASON CITY, IOWA, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1959 (7c a copy)—This paper consists of Four Sections—Section One No. 100

ols Among Lake Crash Dead

ear the demolished plane in stubble field

-to-Work Law
House Attacks

amendment if the changes he suggested were adopted.

He proposed that before a union shop contract could be negotiated, workers vote by secret ballot as to whether the union would represent them. Union officers also wo[illegible] have [illegible] elected by secret ballot [illegible] Dietz amendment also would require use of the secret ballot in strike votes.

Rep. Scott Swisher (D-Iowa City), Democratic floor leader, said he would be glad to go along with Dietz's amendment. But Rep. Clark McNeal (R-Belmond), the House majority leader, declared:

"I don't know where in the [illegible] child was born bu[illegible] this [illegible] appearance of the little [illegible]

"If we adopt this amendment we will be going a long way. And when you look at it in the cold light of human liberty everyone in this room will re-

'3 Reasons' for Flight by Singers

The three rock 'n' roll stars who died in Tuesday's plane crash north of Clear Lake had three reasons for chartering a plane to take them to their next stop at Fargo, N. D., according to Carroll Anderson, manager of the Surf Ballroom.

They expressed a desire [illegible] said, to make [illegible] preparations for the troupe's Fargo appearance, said they were weary of bus travel and that "they wanted to have time to get their clothes laundered."

Plane Piloted by Clear Lake Man Plows Into Field

Four persons, three identified as nationally famous rock 'n' roll singers, died early Tuesday in a plane crash five miles north of Clear Lake.

The three singers were Buddy Holly, 22, Texas, Ritchie Valens, 21, Los Angeles, and J. P. Richardson, 24, of Louisiana, known professionally as the "Big Bopper."

Also killed was the pilot of the plane, Roger Peterson, 21, Clear Lake.

The entertainers had appeared at the Surf Ballroom Monday night and were to appear at Fargo, N.D., Tuesday night.

Other members of the troupe which appeared at Clear Lake left after the show by chartered bus for Fargo. They are Dion and the Belmonts, Frankie Sardo and the Crickets, of which Holly was the singing star.

APPARENTLY HOLLY, Valens and Richardson decided to fly in order to arrive ahead of the troupe and make advance preparations.

The single-engine, four-place Beechcraft Bonanza left the Mason City Municipal airport shortly after 1 a.m. It crashed about seven miles northwest of the airport. The plane was owned by the Dwyer Flying Service, Mason City.

The trip to Fargo was expected to take about 3½ hours. When no word of the plane's arrival was heard, Jerry Dwyer, owner of the flying service, set out to look for the party. He was delayed several hours because of early morning fog.

Dwyer discovered the wreckage on the Albert Juhl farm at about 9:30 a.m.

It was obvious that the pilot [illegible] straight [illegible] low angle to the ground [illegible] The field slopes slightly toward the northwest.

THE LEFT WING of the plane seemingly struck the ground

BUDDY HOLLY

3 Singers Made Top Recordings

([illegible] Story on Page 2)

All three of the entertainers killed in Tuesday's plane crash near Clear Lake were among the nation's top rock

VINTAGE★ROCK ORDER FORM X21VRP

YES! I WOULD LIKE TO SUBSCRIBE TO VINTAGE ROCK AND RECEIVE MY FREE ROCK 'N' ROLL COMPILATION ALBUMS

☐ **Vintage Rock** (6 issues per year) £23.50 every 12 months by Direct Debit – **saving 35%**

☐ **I wish to purchase a gift subscription for someone else** (see form below)

YOUR DETAILS

Title Forename Surname
Address
Postcode
Tel no**
Email**

GIFT RECIPIENT DETAILS (IF APPROPRIATE)

Title Forename Surname
Address
Postcode
Tel no

**Please enter this information so that Anthem Publishing Ltd can keep you informed about your subscription. You may unsubscribe from these messages at any time.

Anthem Publishing Ltd, publisher of *Vintage Rock*, may contact you with details of our products, services or to undertake research. Please tick here if you prefer not to receive such information by post ☐ phone ☐ email ☐ no thanks ☐

If at any time you wish to stop receiving email communications from Anthem Publishing, you can unsubscribe using the link in any email you receive and or opt out via shop.anthem-publishing.com/privacy

INSTRUCTION TO YOUR BANK OR BUILDING SOCIETY TO PAY BY DIRECT DEBIT

ORIGINATOR'S IDENTIFICATION NUMBER
8 3 7 1 8 1

DIRECT Debit

Name of your Bank or Building Society

Address of your Bank or Building Society

Name of account holder(s)

Branch sort code ☐☐☐☐☐☐

Account number ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society
Please pay Anthem Publishing Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Anthem Publishing and if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank or Building Society.

Signature(s) Date

DIRECT DEBIT GUARANTEE
Direct Debit is only available in the UK. If you're not entirely satisfied with *Vintage Rock* at any time during your subscription, you can cancel it and receive a refund for any unmailed copies

SEND YOUR COMPLETED FORM TO
FREEPOST ANTHEM PUBLISHING
This is all you need - please do not include the full address!

OFFER ENDS 26 JANUARY 2022 OFFER CODE X21VRP

TERMS & CONDITIONS Vintage Rock is published 6 times per year. 35% saving based on UK cover price and is only available to UK subscribers paying by annual Direct Debit. The free gift is only available to UK annual Direct Debit orders and the minimum term is 12 months. The gift will be sent to the person paying for the subscription. Gifts are subject to availability and we reserve the right to substitute the gift with an alternative of similar value if stocks become exhausted.

VINTAGE ROCK
HAIL! HAIL! ROCK'N'ROLL
PLUS
King Curtis SAX ON FIRE
How TV tried to tame Elvis
THE CONTROVERSIAL PERFORMANCES THAT SPARKED A BATTLE FOR AMERICA'S HEART AND SOUL
Linda Thompson MY LIFE WITH THE KING

SCAN HERE

REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE

- GET FREE DELIVERY STRAIGHT TO YOUR DOOR
- NEVER MISS AN ISSUE AGAIN
- ACCESS THE ENTIRE VINTAGE ROCK DIGITAL ISSUE ARCHIVE
- GET SUBSCRIBER-EXCLUSIVE SAVINGS ACROSS OUR ONLINE SHOP
- RECEIVE 6 ISSUES OF VINTAGE ROCK PER YEAR
- GET THE MONTHLY VINTAGE ROCK E-NEWSLETTER

ALL FOR ONLY £23.50 PER YEAR!

Join VINTAGE★ROCKPLUS+ this Christmas and get two FREE rock'n'roll CD compilations

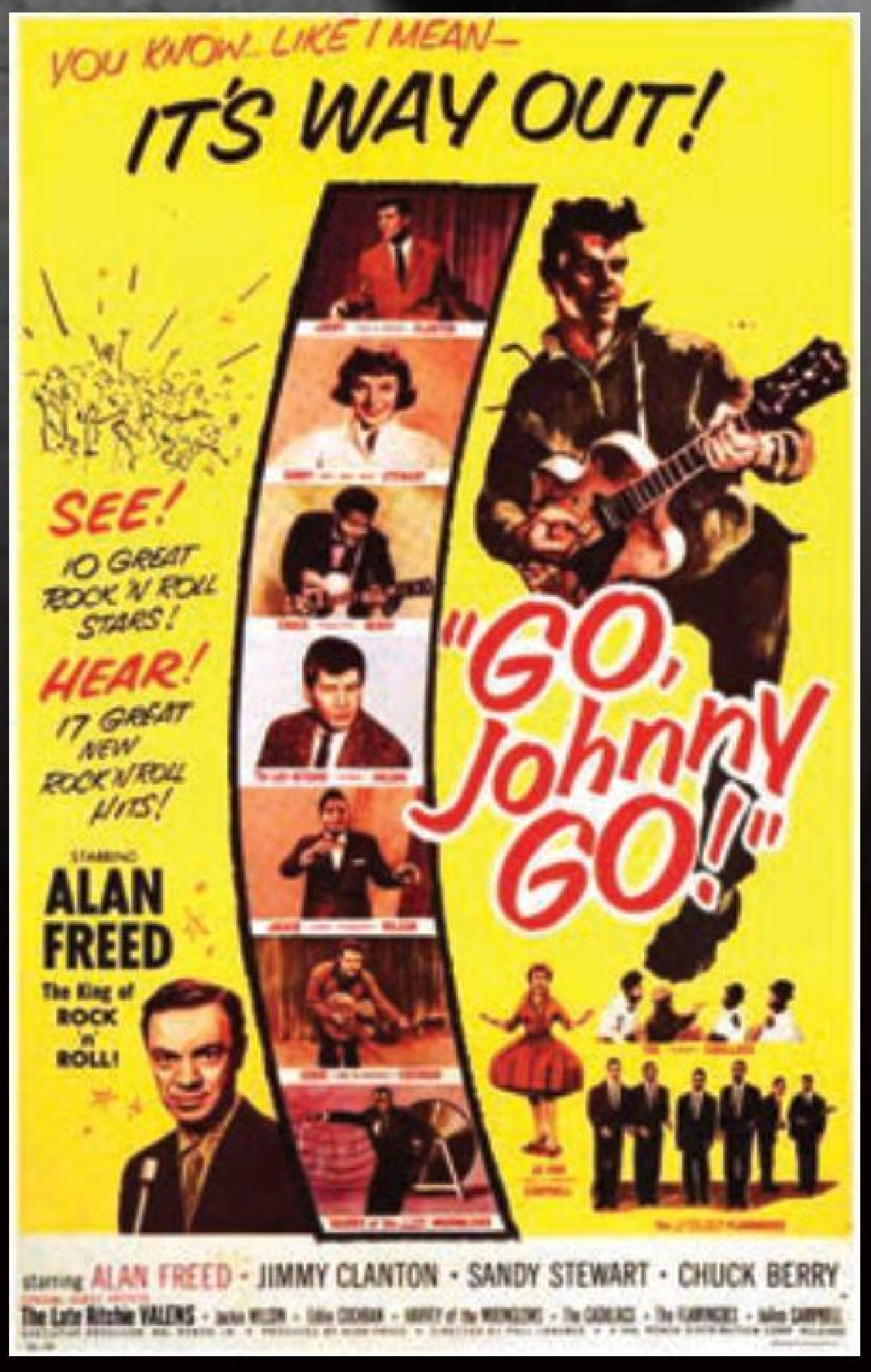
GENE VINCENT
THE SHADOWS
DON EVERLY
VINTAGE★ROCK
HAIL! HAIL! ROCK'N'ROLL!
ELVIS PRESLEY HIS LANDMARK STADIUM ROCK CONCERT
BRIAN SETZER
"I MISSED THE RUMBLE!" THE STRAY CAT LEGEND FEELS THE NEED FOR SPEED ON HIS HOT-ROD INSPIRED NEW SOLO ALBUM
"THE SONGS YOU HEAR ARE TRULY MY LIFE STORY" WANDA JACKSON BOWS OUT WITH FINAL LP ENCORE
SAVE 35%
Stompin' By The Sea
VARIOUS ARTISTS
THE ULTIMATE ROCKIN' CHRISTMAS COLLECTION
The Western Star RECORDING COMPANY

3 EASY WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE

ONLINE AT
vintagerockmag.com/X21VRP

CALL US ON
+44 1371 853609
QUOTE CODE **X21VRP**

BY FREEPOST
COMPLETE THE FORM OPPOSITE (UK ONLY)


YOU KNOW... LIKE I MEAN–
IT'S WAY OUT!
SEE!
10 GREAT ROCK 'N ROLL STARS!
HEAR!
17 GREAT NEW ROCK 'N ROLL HITS!
STARRING
ALAN FREED
The King of ROCK 'n' ROLL!
"GO, Johnny GO!"
starring ALAN FREED • JIMMY CLANTON • SANDY STEWART • CHUCK BERRY
The Late Ritchie VALENS

GO, JOHNNY GO! HITS THE CINEMAS

Rock'n'roll had well and truly gripped the world by the time it hit the box office in June 1959. Billed as "The Biggest Rock'n'Roll Picture Ever!", *Go, Johnny Go!* was masterminded by DJ Alan 'Moondog' Freed and producer-director Hal Roach Jr. As with many of these Big Beat spectaculars, it was weak on plot, heavy on music. Freed himself stars as a talent scout, with teen pin-up Jimmy Clanton as the lead, and pop chanteuse Sandy Stewart as his love interest. Taking top billing in the music stakes were Jackie Wilson, Ritchie Valens, Eddie Cochran, The Flamingos, The Cadillacs, The Moonglows' Harvey Fuqua and, of course, Chuck Berry, who performs *Johnny B. Goode*. "While anyone over the age of 21 would probably do well to avoid subjecting their eardrums to this offbeat assembly of real gone entertainment," wrote one reviewer, "the fact remains that at least five of the 10 performers... are holders of gold records."

Keystone/Getty

FIVE DECADES OF HITS FROM THE LEGENDARY "MAN IN BLACK"

"Rick and the band are doing an excellent job of keeping Johnny Cash's music alive and well, and for that we are grateful."

W.S. "FLUKE" HOLLAND: DRUMMER WITH JOHNNY CASH & THE TENNESSEE THREE.
1960 -1997

"The attention to detail is striking. I would recommend Johnny Cash Revisited to anyone from die-hard old Johnny Cash fans, to newcomers who want to hear the real deal."

DAVE ROE: BASSIST WITH JOHNNY CASH & THE TENNESSEE THREE
1991-2003

*"Rick McKay channels Cash. His imitation is perfect.
And I don't mean that he sounds 'like Johnny Cash'.
I closed my eyes and listened, and I thought,
'That's Johnny Cash'. End of.
He's that good."*

NEIL MADDEN: REVIEWER AT THE BEEHIVE, HONITON

Visit
www.johnnycashrevisited.com

CASH REVISITED

ELVIS

MONO ⟷ STEREO

THE COMPLETE RCA STUDIO MASTERS 1956

2 CD MONO/STEREO

Complete remastered recordings in mono and for the first time in stereo. Using DES (Digitally Extracted Stereo) creating new authentic stereo mixes from original mono recordings.

PRE-ORDER NOW

OUT 26TH NOVEMBER 2021

hmv
hmv.com

amazon.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED BY

MEMPHIS Recording SERVICE

COMPACT disc
MRDS10056

MONO
STEREO SOUND